1 What is media theory?

Before we begin to answer the question 'What is media theory?', we must ask two more basic questions: what are media and what is theory?

What are media?

We could think of a list: television, film, radio, newspapers and the internet, to name but a few. But a list tells us little about what commonly defines all these media. Perhaps the solution is to define media as technologies that communicate messages to audiences in different parts of a region, country or even the world. These media are the most obvious and familiar to us, but they are more accurately described as *mass* media. Mass media mean that 'no interaction among those co-present can take place between sender and receivers' (Luhmann 2000: 2). The term 'mass', in this sense, refers to the *mass*ive reception of media such as television, film, and so on.

However, media do not have to be mass to be media. This fact draws our attention to an historical sense of a *medium* (the singular form) as an intervening substance or agency (Williams 1983a). Before the age of mass media, the term 'medium' referred to something or someone situated between an object (the message being sent) and a subject (the receiver of the message). As Burton (1621) remarks, 'To the Sight three things are required, the Object, the Organ, and the Medium' (quoted in Williams 1983a: 203). For example, I am looking at a computer screen as I type these words. The object is the screen and the organ is my eye(s). So what is the medium between my eyes and the screen? Answer: light. Without light, I would not be able to see what I was typing – and you would not be able to read this book. The computer is a medium of its own, of course, but it would be nothing without the medium of light. This historical sense also applies to a human medium like a clairvoyant. A human medium is possessed by a supernatural spirit that sends messages through him or her to another party. Not everyone believes in this type of medium – but many of us still read our stars. Moreover, the human medium continues to capture the imagination of contemporary popular culture, not least in films such as *The Others* (2001) and *Don't Look Now* (1973). Next time someone asks you what media studies is all about, give them a two-word answer: 'the paranormal'.

Of course, media in their historical sense are quite different from today's media. Nonetheless, this historical sense provides an important dimension to

what mass media are. The supernatural, spiritual essence of media technologies lives on with every new invention. It is interesting to gauge the amazed and astonished reactions to early telegraph communications, for instance. In 1844, the American inventor, Samuel Morse, transmitted a telegraph message from Washington, DC, to Baltimore, Maryland, that was decoded into the words: *What hath God wrought?* Such was the astonishment with which it was received that the man at the other end, Alfred Vail, sent the same message back to Morse. In today's parlance, this would translate as: What has God created? The implication is that only a divine presence could have possibly enabled such a remarkable feat of communication. The radio and television were greeted with similar wonderment. With this historical sense in mind, we can confidently claim that media are not objects (newspapers, television sets, telegraph messages, and so on) but means of communication. Objects exist in our *immediate* environment – media *mediate* messages to these objects. So what are the means of communication that constitute media? This brings us to a second sense of media discussed by Raymond Williams (1983a): the technical sense. We can distinguish between word-of-mouth, print, audio, visual, analogue, digital, and so on, all of which are media in the technical sense. In this sense, the radio set which we listen to is an object; the means by which it communicates messages to us (digital or analogue) is a medium.

In addition to historical and technical senses, Williams describes a third etymological sense of the term 'media': the capitalist sense. This sense developed during the nineteenth century when media became profitable enterprises – means of making money as well as means of communication. The driving force behind the capitalist sense was commercial advertising. Early forms of mass media – such as broadsheet newspapers – relied on sales alone, which brought relatively modest financial returns, but resultant revenues from the expansion of advertising content transformed the craft of media production into a lucrative business sector.

As well as Williams's three senses, media are also importantly defined in their social and cultural senses. A common phrase used today is 'the media'. For instance, we sometimes hear celebrities say that '*the media* tells lies' or '*the media* hunts in a pack like a feral beast' (Tony Blair), or we might say ourselves that '*the media* influences people'. Even media theorists like Niklas Luhmann use the phrase – for example, I quote: 'Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through *the mass media*' (Luhmann 2000: 1 – my italics). As we have already discussed, however, media is a plural form that literally means 'mediums' so it seems strange to bracket media under a single entity (i.e. *the media*). A phrase like '*the media* tells lies' literally means '*the mediums* tells lies', which is grammatical nonsense. Nonetheless, the phrase 'the media' resonates so loudly in a social and cultural sense that it cannot be – nor should it be – merely dismissed as incorrect English usage. The social and cultural senses of the term, therefore,

refer to how media are perceived by us. In Western democracies such as Britain and the United States, for example, media are perceived both positively (as democratic sources of truth) and negatively (as powerful manipulators of truth). By contrast, in countries where media are wholly (e.g. China) or partly (e.g. Thailand) controlled by governments, the social and cultural senses of media may be underscored by their wider political sense – as tools of propaganda and social control.

So we have identified at least six senses of what media are (historical, technical, capitalist, social, cultural, political), notwithstanding several other senses – for example, psychological – that we have no room to consider here but will discuss later (Chapter 2 considers psychological 'media effects'). 'Media' clearly has no straightforward definition. The next question we must address is: what is theory?

What is theory?

Theory, like a virus, spreads fear and trepidation among the student population. It is almost as frightening as philosophy, which spreads fear and trepidation among the postgraduate population (not to mention one or two academics). But theory is really nothing more than a way of thinking that is more systematic and sophisticated than 'thinking' in an everyday sense.

An example might suffice. When we learn to drive a car – a rite of passage that most of us will undertake at some stage in our lives – we must think all the time about how to steer, when to brake, where to indicate left or right, and so on. However, we do not stop to think about *why* we are learning to drive a car, or why a *car* is what we are driving, or how we are operating within a particular set of rules and conventions that constitute the 'Highway Code'. After all, if we did stop to think about all these things, we would probably crash! Some of us might need to pass a 'theory test' – but this is really a practical test designed to transform us into practitioners (i.e. drivers). And then, a few months after we have passed our driving test and purchased our first car, we will start to think far less about the 'why' and 'how' questions, not to mention the 'where' and 'when' ones. Experienced drivers often talk about not needing to think about driving because it has become such a routine, familiar, everyday activity.

But to *do* theory requires us to break away from routine, familiar, everyday ways of thinking – or not thinking. To extend the current example, we need to get out of our cars and start to think with more depth and breadth. Intelligent questions are the foundations for intelligent theory, so the theorist in all of us might ask: why has the motor car become such a vital means of transportation in modern times? How does a private – yet mass – method of transport reflect our social and cultural values? What are the consequences of

mass car production and consumption? What alternative forms of transport might compete with the car? Why is car transportation more popular, generally, than public transport? What would happen if each driver practised their own interpretation of the Highway Code? These questions and others start to dig into a theory of cars. The task of this book, of course, is to excavate theories of media.

What is the opposite of theory? Answer: practice. Yes, to some extent this is true, but then again, theory and practice should be treated like the contemporary husband–wife relationship – happily married but always liable to divorce. Abstract theory, in this respect, is like the lone ranger, in search of but unable to find fulfilment. Theory without practice is lonely abstraction, as was sadly demonstrated by some theorists in the 1980s who expressed 'resolute (and excessive) anti-empiricism' (Corner 1998: 150) – and who have been forgotten about ever since. Indeed, the key to unlocking the best theories lies in the practical evidence that is brought forward to support them. In short, a good theory is like a good defence in a court of law. There are no fixed rules about the type or scope of evidence that might be required, but evidence provides a bridge between theory and practice. Theory that has no foundation in practice is likely to appear disconnected or contrived. On the other hand, practice disconnected from theory is aimless and uninteresting to media scholars like us. Theoretical evidence may derive from empirical research such as surveys or interviewing, or perhaps from analysis of texts such as a popular song, film or novel, or perhaps from historical documents and accounts, including biographies and autobiographies. The type of evidence used will have a crucial bearing on how a particular theory is constructed, evaluated and – in some cases – tested out. On the whole, a theory backed by wide-ranging evidence from diverse sources will withstand the test of time longer than a theory built on shaky evidence from limited sources.

What is media theory?

We now have some sense of what media are and what theory is. So what is media theory? If we condense the discussion above, media theory can be defined as a systematic way of thinking about means of communication. These might be means of communication used historically, such as light and smoke, or mass means associated with today's electronic media technologies. Of course, this book is mostly about contemporary media theory – not theories of media history – although we will discuss theories of modernity (see Chapter 3) which, in part, offer ways of thinking historically about the development of modern civilizations. An important point about *doing* media theory is to break free from our everyday experiences, and to think about

them at a critical distance, through the different perspectives that we will encounter.

How to use this book

Before we begin to tackle this media theory book, a note on how best to use it. The eight main chapters discuss distinctive themes or strands in media theory. Ideally, the chapters should be read in order (i.e. Chapters 2–9) and – even more ideally – treated as distinct topics of discussion in the context of a media theory undergraduate-level course or module. In the spirit of Michel de Certeau (as discussed in Chapter 9), however, readers are free to use this book as they see fit, regardless of authorial intentions. If you do decide to move freely over this text – which you may be doing already, oblivious to what I write now – I have a few authorial recommendations. Chapter 2 would be the best place to start for newcomers to media theory. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 should be read in order and compared with one another. These three chapters form the cornerstone of the structure–agency debate that runs through the whole of media theory. Chapters 6 and 8 are essential but can be read out of sequence with the rest of the book if required, although Chapter 8 should not be read before Chapter 3, nor Chapter 6 before Chapter 4, nor Chapter 9 before Chapter 5. Chapter 7 should not be read before Chapters 3 and 4. Chapters 7 and 9 do not follow each other in the book, but should be compared with one another where possible. Chapters 7 and 8 share similar concerns but from different theoretical perspectives. Chapter 10 is a short summary of what has gone before.

A 'Glossary' is included for reference purposes, but the definitions of key terms are necessarily brief and should not be relied upon without first consulting the relevant discussion within the main chapters of the book. Words defined in the Glossary are shown in bold on their first occurrence. Further reading lists at the end of each chapter are intended as a starting point – but only that – in the search for wider sources on media theory. The best advice is to read and research widely. It is also very important, if you are new to media theory, that you seek out and read first-hand theory – that is, the work by authors discussed throughout this book. For example, a theorist we have encountered already in this introductory chapter is called Raymond Williams, and several of Williams's theoretical works are discussed later – for example, a book called *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Williams 2003). Locate Williams's works in the 'Bibliography' section to the rear of this book, and then search them out in your university libraries. You may even wish to buy a book or two. Inter-library loans are an option if all else fails. Reading raw, first-hand theory can be frustrating because the terminology and writing style of some of the best-known theorists are notoriously complex. Nonetheless,

reading theory close-up and discussing it with others is the key to becoming a theorist oneself – and theorists tend to get first-class honours (in theory at least). So read this book in companion with the works of media theory it discusses. There is more to media theory than can be accommodated here. This book is merely a media theory taster – a means to several ends rather than an end itself.

2 Behaviourism and media effects

Introduction

The first way of thinking about media as they developed in each of their successive forms has been to try and gauge their effect on human behaviour and well-being. This is the case from the earliest mass media to the latest forms such as video games and the internet. In each case, expressions of concern by prominent public figures have led to a perceived panic that – ironically – is partly spread by other media forms, such as the newspaper press. Occasionally, as we will see in Cantril's study of radio, panic spreads to the public at large. 'Effects' studies tend to have one of two main objectives. The first of these is a genuine social, moral and political objective to measure the power of media technologies to affect how individuals think, feel and act. The other objective – sometimes ulterior – is motivated by commercial interests and attempts to measure the effectiveness of media as vehicles for advertising and publicity campaigns. Media are often said to have effects but these can be benevolent as well as malign, depending on your point of view. There is a fine line between propaganda and publicity. Propaganda is nearly always considered an evil; on the other hand, any publicity – so the saying goes – is good publicity. This chapter is more interested in work that deals with the social and cultural, as opposed to commercial, implications of media technologies, and discussion begins with Lasswell's classic analysis of the effects of propaganda.

The question about whether or not media affect us remains an interesting one despite the fact that nearly a century of research and theoretical endeavour has been spent trying to answer just this question. Very few studies have conclusively identified or rejected the possibility of **media effects**. Part of the problem is its sheer complexity. After all, rarely are comparable institutions such as religion and law analysed in terms of their effects on individuals (McQuail 1977). These institutions, so we are led to believe, are good for us and do not harm us if we behave accordingly. Media institutions, on the other hand, are bad for us – or at best, equally cursed and blessed. Newspapers, for example, are referred to as the 'Fourth Estate' in their democratic role but as 'the gutter press' when they engage in sleazy investigative journalism. Moreover, the meaning of the term 'effects' is never straightforward. Laboratory experiments by psychologists such as Wertham to assess levels of aggression in individuals during the viewing of a violent television drama, as we shall discuss, are limited to the measuring of short-term, direct effects.

Long-term effects are much harder to measure – despite the best intentions of cultivation theory – but, if identified, would be far more significant to a theoretical understanding of media power. There is also the issue of whether media effects mostly *affect* individuals, groups, institutions, or societies and cultures more widely.

Media theories discussed in this chapter cut across the spectrum of **behaviourism**, from **direct effects** theory – sometimes called the 'hypodermic syringe model' of powerful effects – in which a (media) stimulus is followed by a straightforward (audience) response, to theories of active audiences that use media to satisfy particular needs and enable the flow of media communications from person to person. It has been stated that 'The history of mass communications research is conspicuously lacking in any clear evidence on the precise influence of the mass media' (Cumberbatch and Howitt 1989: 25). Many questions about media effects continue to be unanswered. Regardless of this state of affairs, the 'effects' debate remains alive and was revived in the 1990s, not least as a topic of media and public interest (see Barker and Petley 2001). When people who are not media students hear about an academic subject called media studies, they tend to guess that 'media power' and 'media effects' will be two of the big issues on the agenda. This points to why pioneering media studies dating back to the early twentieth century strove to learn more about these big issues. So it is with the big issues that we begin.

Lasswell's chain of communication and propaganda technique

A pioneering theoretical model of media effects is known as Lasswell's formula or **chain of communication**. According to Harold Lasswell (1971b), any act of communication – whether face-to-face or mediated – can be dissected into five processes that require separate methods of analysis, as shown in Figure 2.1.

Although Lasswell was interested in all five of these processes and their corresponding methods of analysis, his most important ideas relate to the question of effects. As Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl point out:

> The Lasswell formula shows a typical trait of early communication models: it more or less takes for granted that the communicator has some intention of influencing the receiver and, hence, that communication should be treated mainly as a persuasive process. It is also assumed that messages always have effects.
>
> (McQuail and Windahl 1993: 14)

Nonetheless, this chain of communication is an apt way of introducing not just theories of media effects but media theory more broadly. All the theories discussed in this book can fit into one or more of these five processes. Theories of behaviourism explored in this chapter, though, are mostly concerned with audience and effect analysis – and to a lesser extent content analysis of, for example, violence on television.

WHO ...	*Control analysis*
↓	
SAYS WHAT ...	*Content analysis*
↓	
IN WHICH CHANNEL ...	*Media analysis*
↓	
TO WHOM ...	*Audience analysis*
↓	
WITH WHAT EFFECT?	*Effect analysis*

Figure 2.1 Lasswell's chain of communication

Under ideal conditions, any message that is communicated by a sender will reach its intended receiver(s) along an unbroken chain and free from interference or misinterpretation. Lasswell describes an effective relay of communication as one of *total conductance* between sender and receiver. But we do not live in an ideal world. Far from it, messages that are sent via mass media are particularly prone to being altered or misunderstood along their chains of communication, meaning *modified conductance* or *no conductance* between sender and receivers. What Lasswell is describing, to put it another way, is a chain-like structure of media and word-of-mouth communications not dissimilar to a sophisticated game of Chinese Whispers.

The structure of human communication in an age of media technologies would appear at first glance to be very different from the structure of communication that operates among (non-human) animals. On the contrary, Lasswell argues that the structure of human – like animal – communication serves vital functions that help to maintain order and well-being among the communicators (i.e. senders and receivers). Like animals, human beings take on particular roles as communicators – leaders, followers, watch-keepers – that carry certain expectations in terms of behaviour and action. In order to achieve harmony and consensus, chains of communication serve three specialist functions in any given society, whether human or animal:

1 *Surveillance of the environment*: in human societies this is typically dealt with by nation-states, who assign surveillance roles to diplomats, armies and spies, for example.
2 *Correspondence with the parts of society in responding to the environment*:

this is usually communicated by specialists such as politicians, press officers and journalists via mass media.

3 *Transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next*: this is the job of teachers and lecturers, among others.

(Lasswell 1971b: 85)

These three specialist functions of communication are evident in Lasswell's behaviourist account of propaganda, which warrants discussion at this point so as to get at the roots of his ideas about media effects. *Propaganda Technique in World War I* (first published in 1927) analyses and evaluates the effectiveness of propaganda produced, in particular, by the American, British and German state authorities during the First World War (1914–18). His conclusions are a testimony to the importance of 'mobilizing minds as well as men and money in war' (Lasswell 1971a: 195). Propaganda is only effective, however, if it can convince 'the meanest as well as the keenest intelligence' (Lasswell 1971a: 201) and it has to tap into latent public opinion within the society it aims to influence. Good propaganda technique is difficult to accomplish and even harder to maintain.

When propaganda works, though, it is an extremely effective means to win support and – in this case – win a war. Lasswell argues that the British and American were more effective than the German propagandists during the war. The following excerpt is particularly revealing:

> The British were amazingly successful in the development of humanitarian war aims. The Germans aroused much resentment and suspicion abroad by talking about a war of German Kultur, and by underplaying the humanitarian ideal. The British talked about a war to protect international law and to guarantee the sanctity of treaties, and they fought against a monster, known as autocratic militarism, in the name of democracy. . . . The Germans were never able to efface the initial impression that they were the aggressors.
>
> (Lasswell 1971a: 196, 197)

According to Lasswell, during the early years of war it was still in the balance as to how the Americans would act: join the British forces, or side with the Germans, or remain neutral. Propaganda alone did not determine the American decision to form an alliance with the British – the German invasion of Belgium, France and Russia was the ultimate deciding factor – but Lasswell suggests that the British cause won more sympathy with American state and public opinion partly due to the humanitarian aims that Britain propagated through mass media (see Figure 2.2).

Returning to Lasswell's chain of communication, it is clear how propaganda plays a vital function when its correspondence with different parts of a



Figure 2.2 WW1 British propaganda (Lord Kitchener)

society is able to affect human behaviour and action, stirring patriotism in people. In turn, propaganda can enable recruitment of civilians who will fight for the cause and – more importantly – urge other societies to become allies. Effective propaganda can therefore provide a powerful stimulus for a targeted response. For instance, it can demoralize the opposition: 'propaganda saps the stamina of the armed and civilian forces of the enemy, and smoothes the path for the mailed fist of men and metal' (Lasswell 1971a: 214). The war dance stirred the emotions of primitive tribes; the propaganda machine, likewise but on a much grander scale, is able to 'weld thousands and even millions of human beings into one amalgamated mass of hate and will and hope' (Lasswell 1971a: 221). Propaganda is considered to be a specialist and vital function in modern societies, and if we apply its *total conductance* effects to Lasswell's chain of communication, we have something approaching a behaviourist media theory of direct effects.

Propaganda continues to play a central role in today's military and political affairs, not least in the 'War on Terror' (see Chapter 7 for more on

propaganda from political economy and postcolonial perspectives). A propaganda stimulus, however, is not always followed by an expected response. The British Government's dossier on weapons of mass destruction proved to be impotent propaganda when it became clear that Iraq possessed no such weapons. The fickleness of propaganda highlights a key shortcoming in Lasswell's formula – that it has 'the tendency to exaggerate the effects of, especially, mass communication' (McQuail and Windahl 1993: 14). As we can see in Figure 2.1, all the arrows point in the same direction. This means that any form of communication – including propaganda – is assumed to travel in a linear, one-way direction from sender to receiver with identifiable (intended or unintended) effects. It is also assumed that the receiver will send this communication to further receivers down the chain – like Chinese Whispers – so long as sufficient conductance occurs at the relay point. In no way is this chain of communication assumed to travel back towards senders at certain points in the sequence. In practice, though, propaganda is not a unidirectional process in which an original stimulus ends in a response. If propaganda – or any form of media communication – is to be effective, its response needs to be fed back to the sender in order to evaluate and improve upon its effectiveness next time. Regardless of weaknesses in Lasswell's chain of communication, here is a useful starting point in attempting to understand how media can affect people's lives.

Wertham: *Seduction of the Innocent*

We can see in Lasswell's version of direct effects theory that media act as communicative channels for a stimulus to receive a straightforward response. The theories of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham can be placed at the extremities of this 'direct effects' argument. The two chief targets of Wertham's vitriol in *Seduction of the Innocent* (1955) are crime comics (see Figure 2.3) and television. Particularly worrying to Wertham is the influence of these mass media on 'the minds and behaviour of children who come in contact with them' (Wertham 1955: v). He claims that 'There is at present in all media, especially as they affect children, a pattern of violence, brutality, sadism, blood-lust, shrewdness, callous disregard for human life ... The quantity of violence in all the media is stupendous' (Wertham 1955: 360). Wertham provides evidence for his theories about the malignant effects of media from a combination of content analysis and the results of psychological tests with children who visited his clinic. Before we discuss his theories, it is important to consider briefly the methods he deploys.

Most of the tests required children to look at images and stories from comics or television shows, and interpret them for the benefit of the researcher. In the Thematic Apperception Test, for example, 'the child is

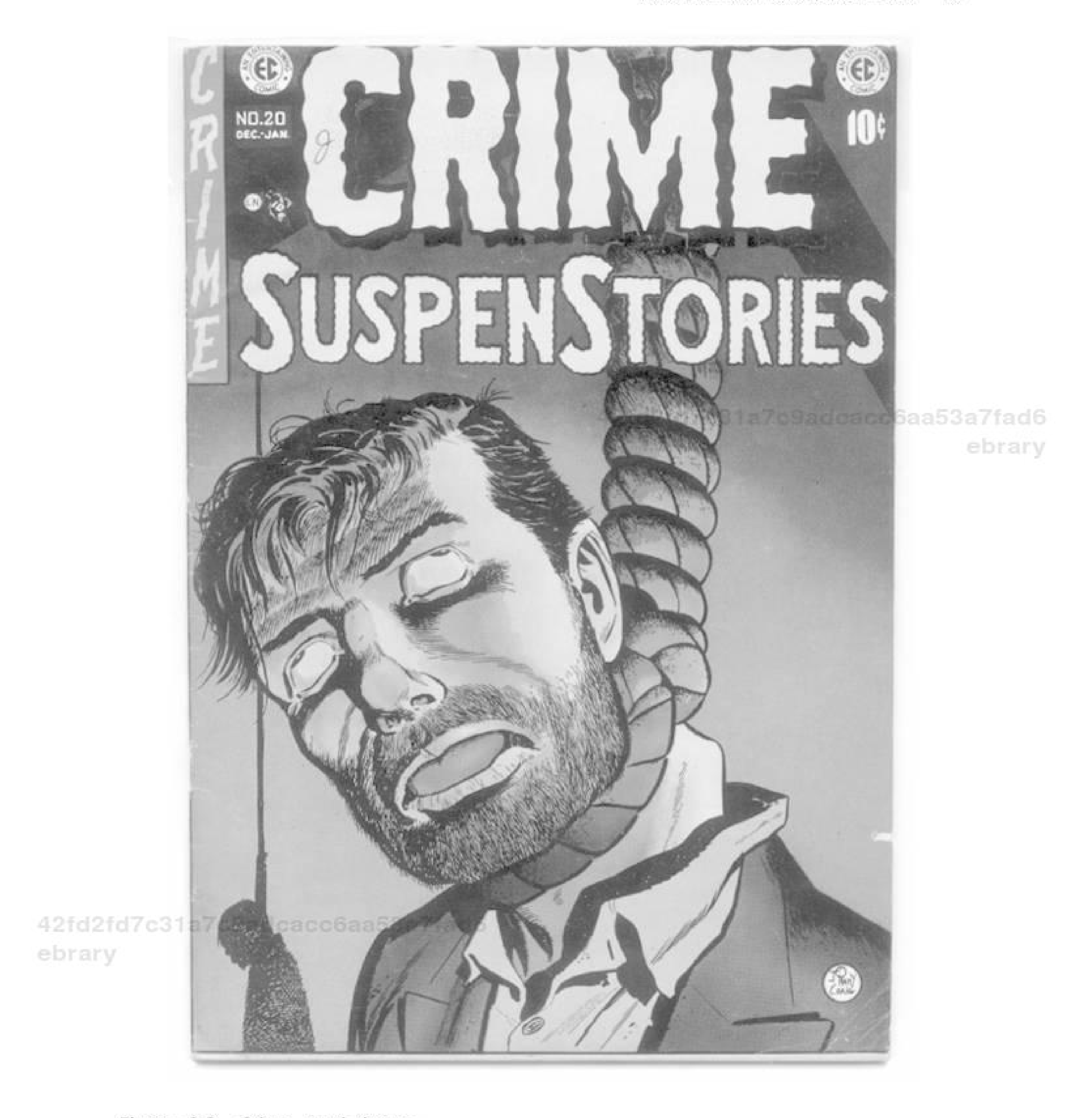


Figure 2.3 Crime comic image

shown a series of pictures depicting various scenes and is asked to tell stories about them' (Wertham 1955: 57). Similarly, the Duess Test requires children to provide their own endings to stories that are told to them through the medium of comics or television. Both these tests can seriously undermine the findings that they produce because of their crude artificiality. The psychiatrist himself suspects the unscientific unreliability of the Duess Test by

recommending that it be used only for children below the age of 11 and that 'one should be careful not to view the child as if he [*sic*] were a neurotic adult or read too much abnormality into him' (Wertham 1955: 60). There is also a counter-interpretation of these types of laboratory testing in that they have been found to encourage research subjects to provide responses that the researcher is expecting rather than responses of their own accord. How can children respond instinctively to such artificial stimuli in darkened laboratory rooms? Not all psychological tests are flawed but those that have been deployed to measure media effects have tended to suffer serious deficiencies (see Gauntlett 2005). The notorious 'Bobo' doll experiment (Bandura and Walters 1969) – in which nursery-school children were found to act more aggressively towards an inflated plastic doll after viewing a film of an adult doing the same – is unsurpassed in its artificiality and nonsensicality.

Leaving to one side the dubious reliability of Wertham's methods, let us examine five psychological problems that he identifies in relation to media effects:

1. *Passivity*: he argues that television and comics encourage passivity in children due to their low order of literacy: 'In both, the entertainment flows over the child' (Wertham 1955: 355). The saving grace for television is that it can offer some scope for active viewing if watched in the company of intelligent adults.
2. *Misconceptions*: television and comics teach children unhealthy values that they associate with the real world. For instance: 'I have found that children from three to four have learned from television that killing, especially shooting, is one of the established procedures for coping with a problem' (Wertham 1955: 372).
3. *Imitation*: children consciously copy what they learn from these media: 'That children imitate what they see on the television screen is undoubted. There have been cases where five-year-olds have shot at the screen with their father's gun to join in what they were looking at' (Wertham 1955: 379–80). Similarly, children twist each other's arms and fight with each other in ways that copy the behaviour of their favourite superheroes.
4. *Identification*: a process of subconscious identification occurs when children come into contact with these media, and this identification is often with 'the powerful villain' rather than the hero or victim: 'comic books are conditioning children to identify themselves with the strong man, however evil he may be. The hero in crime comics is not the hero unless he acts like a criminal' (Wertham 1955: 116).
5. *Desensitization*: such is the high volume of violent and pornographic images portrayed by children's media that they are now commonplace and taken for granted: 'A generation is being desensitized by

> these literal horror images' (Wertham 1955: 112). Desensitization theory states that real-life acts of violence become increasingly acceptable in direct proportion to more media violence.

These are forthright views indeed! If the title is not enough – *Seduction of the Innocent* – just browsing the contents page of Wertham's book hints at the horrific vision he foresees. Chapter 13 is called 'Homicide at Home: Television and the Child'! Even if we argue that these views overstate media effects and understate the capacity of children to distinguish fantasy from reality, it cannot be denied that Wertham's ideas captured the public mood during the advent of media such as television. His ideas also spurned a small library of further studies into children and television. Some research has partly supported these ideas, such as the finding that '[Television's] introduction in several countries has coincided with rises in crime rates and in other indices of social disruption' (Howe 1977: 102) and the similarly cautious conclusion that 'television is unlikely to cause aggressive behaviour, although it could precipitate it in those few children who are emotionally disturbed' (Himmelweit et al. 1958: 20). The latter study, moreover, rejected the 'release-valve' theory that television functions positively as a harmless channel through which real-life viewer aggression can be vicariously acted out.

For every study that identifies direct effects though, many more question Wertham's account. One such study of children's television use suggests that 'It is they who use television, rather than television that uses them' (Schramm et al. 1961: 1). Another study that comprehensively reviews the literature concludes that while 'overindulgence with television, as with most other things, can bring problems, it is equally true that when it is used properly and constructively television can have many positive influences on young viewers' (Gunter and McAleer 1997: 217). Another critic responds directly to the psychiatrist's work:

> I suspect it would be a dull child indeed who could go to Dr. Wertham's clinic and not discover very quickly that most of his problematical behaviour can be explained in terms of the comic books . . . to blame the comic books, as Dr. Wertham does, is simple-minded.
>
> (Warshow 1957: 206 and 210)

Despite these criticisms, the spirit of Wertham has lived on, nonetheless, in campaigns against violence and aggression on television. Campaigners in the 1980s like Mary Whitehouse in Britain and the Parents' Music Resource Center in the United States have called for television and popular music censorship respectively. More recently, 'Media Watch' organizations operating in several countries have enjoyed popular support and publicity, particularly during heightened incidents of violent crime in the 'real world'.

Having said this, Wertham's theoretical perspective has numerous limitations without doubt. One is his assumption that children view television and comics as mirrors of the real world. Even children surely have no misconceptions about the difference between, say, a television drama about downtown LA and the real streets of Los Angeles. Another limitation of his ideas is their focus on cases of juvenile delinquency in response to violent images, which he then suggests are symptomatic of a whole generation of children. If Wertham focused on the 'bigger picture', it would surely reveal that a large majority of children adopt a sensible response to what they read and watch, and rarely engage in anything but superficial troublemaking like children have done since time eternal. Moreover, the claim that children have 'innocent minds' is more of a Romanticist construction – as depicted by the poet William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and Experience' – than a social psychological matter of fact. It can also be argued that young people are more (not less) media literate than their elders, and have more sophisticated skills at interpreting, say, television than the adults who fret and write sensational reports about media effects (see discussion of media literacy in Chapter 9). Most problematic of all, Wertham's psychological approach does not sufficiently explore wider sources of seduction that foster anti-social behaviour other than the television screen or comic book. We are left with the impression that socio-economic conditions such as dysfunctional families, inadequate housing, poverty and lack of schooling are trifles compared to the harmful effects of omnipotent mass media. Media are made scapegoats for the ills of society by Wertham, in a manner sometimes indulged in by politicians who wish to divert blame away from their policies. Wertham's views had a significant impact on theories of media effects when they were aired, but seem rather contrived and naïve now.

Cantril: *The Invasion from Mars*

While Lasswell and Wertham are interested in how media directly spread mass propaganda and effects, the social psychologist Hadley Cantril's study of mass panic tends to support an *indirect* media effects perspective. Cantril was particularly keen to assess the effects of radio on its listeners, since at the time of his research in the 1930s radio was the newest and most pervasive medium in the United States – as well as Europe. Cantril had been working on a project to explore the psychology of radio listening when an unexpected opportunity arose to investigate radio's effects on human behaviour. On the night of 30 October 1938, between 8–9pm, the day before Halloween, Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) broadcast an adaptation of H. G. Wells's novel, *War of the Worlds*. It starred Orson Welles and a small cast of young actors. Events transpired as follows:

> Long before the broadcast had ended, people all over the United States were praying, crying, fleeing frantically to escape death from the Martians … At least six million people heard the broadcast. At least a million of them were frightened or disturbed.
>
> (Cantril et al. 1947: 47)

Why did so many people have cause to panic when they heard this play on the radio? This is the question that Cantril and his project assistants sought to answer. Shortly after the broadcast, they interviewed 135 people who had listened in, over 100 of whom were known to have been upset by what they had heard.

The most frightening passage of the radio play involved the invasion of several American towns and cities by evil Martians riding around in giant tripod machines with hands that emitted destructive heat-rays. The moment that transformed fiction into horrific reality for a million Americans was when a radio announcer spoke fearfully in the midst of bloody battle:

> ANNOUNCER: I'm speaking from the roof of Broadcasting Building, New York City. The bells you hear are ringing to warn the people to evacuate the city as the Martians approach. … No more defenses. Our army wiped out … artillery, air force, everything wiped out. This may be the last broadcast. … Now the smoke's spreading faster. It's reached Times Square. People trying to run away from it, but it's no use. They're falling like flies. Now the smoke's crossing Sixth Avenue … Fifth Avenue … 100 yards away … it's 50 feet.
> SIGNAL TO THE ANNOUNCER IS LOST.
>
> (quoted in Cantril et al. 1947: 30–1)

At this point, an intermission break was announced. Unfortunately, some people by now had left their radio sets and even left their homes, presumably heading in the opposite direction from New York among other places!

So why the panic? Cantril suggests five reasons following analysis of interviews, all of which indicate the high degree of realism with which the radio play was received by its audience:

1. Radio was – and still is – an accepted medium for important announcements.
2. The named speakers during the broadcast had prestige (including four Professors of Autonomy, Captains, Generals and the Secretary of the Interior).
3. All the speakers were baffled about events, despite their expertise.
4. Specific incidents were reported in specific places (e.g. smoke in Times Square).

5 The total experience (or context) of listening to the broadcast added to the tension caused by the content of the play.

The realism of the stimulus, therefore, led to a panic in response, but this conclusion did not answer the question about why some people panicked while others heard the play for what it was – light entertainment. According to Cantril's analysis, the main factor determining why some people believed the play to be a real-life news report was their lack of critical ability, in particular as they had 'failed to make adequate checks' (Cantril et al. 1947: 107) to ascertain the fact that this was fiction. Those listeners educated sufficiently to exhibit critical ability made sure-fire checks – such as turning the dial to check that other radio stations were not reporting the invasion, or consulting the radio listings in the newspaper – while those without the necessary critical ability made less rigorous checks, such as phoning an equally uneducated friend!

So it seems education was the key factor in whether listeners believed in the reality of what they were hearing or did not. Following empirical analysis, however, it was clear that 'Critical ability alone is not a sure preventive of panic. It may be overpowered by an individual's own susceptible personality' (Cantril et al. 1947: 149). Cantril wanted to know more about the social and psychological characteristics of those who experienced 'personal susceptibility'. His investigations found seven characteristics of susceptibility to the effects of radio and other media:

1 Social insecurity (e.g. financial depression, unemployment, political oppression).
2 Phobias (e.g. fear of heights, war, Martians, and so on).
3 Amount of worry.
4 Lack of self-confidence.
5 Fatalism (or belief in mysterious powers that predetermine one's destiny).
6 Religiosity (or belief in a particular faith).
7 Frequency of church attendance.

(Cantril et al. 1947: 130)

Personal characteristics of human behaviour, therefore, can respond to a stimulus – such as a media broadcast – in a way that is not always sufficiently compensated by competing social factors, such as educational background.

What are the underlying causes of panic? According to Cantril, panic is caused by a perceived threat to an individual's Ego. The Ego refers to the immediate life-world of an individual, and includes their personal and social values in connection with the people closest to them, such as relatives and friends (Cantril et al. 1947: 197–8). Those individuals with high enough degrees of personal susceptibility to believe that an invasion from Mars was

really happening were bound to panic because their Egos faced annihilation: 'The coming of the Martians did not present a situation where the individual could preserve one value if he [*sic*] sacrificed another . . . the individual stood to lose *all* his values at once' (Cantril et al. 1947: 200). In this case, the effects of radio upon the Ego proved to be harmless when – eventually – the susceptible listeners found out their folly. But radio is a vehicle for real as well as fictional stimuli, and it can play on people's fears for far more dangerous ends. As Cantril points out with respect to Nazi Germany's use of 'People's Radio Sets' at this time, 'The whole tactics of Hitler show the importance he places on providing directed relief to bewildered souls. If they are not already sufficiently bewildered, bewilderment can be manufactured by sufficient propaganda' (Cantril et al. 1947: 203). Like Lasswell, he perceives the most significant media effects in the techniques of political propaganda.

Cantril's theory of mass panic in relation to the CBS broadcast of *War of the Worlds* is empirically informed but can be criticized on various fronts. Not least, Cantril seems to exaggerate the extent to which panic was widespread across the American population in response to the broadcast. Only 12 per cent of the population listened to the play and only one in six listeners believed that they were listening to a real news event (Cantril et al. 1947: 55). This means that only 2 per cent of Americans experienced panic, which is hardly an alarming proportion of the population. Cantril's analysis is also guilty of converting statistical correlations into theoretical cause-and-effect assumptions. For example, statistics showed that individuals who worried about their financial well-being were more prone to fall victim to the effects of the radio broadcast. Here we have a correlation but this does not mean that financial concerns cause individuals to be more affected by what they hear on the radio. The fallacy of a self-fulfilling prophecy is in evidence, too, in identifying individuals who are more susceptible to fear and worry in different ways, and then showing that they are also more susceptible to panic in front of a radio set.

Nonetheless, Cantril's ideas remain compelling and it would be unfair to criticize them on the grounds of a simplistic psychological agenda that neglects to consider wider social and political forces. Importantly, he improves on Wertham's direct effects approach by analysing how media have only indirect, *mediating* effects that merely reinforce – rather than create – serious social problems such as unemployment and depression. Elsewhere he suggests that radio can be a force for good given that it is an inherently democratic medium which *broad*casts the majority view; it offers potential to provide knowledge and education to underprivileged groups in a society; and it enables all its listeners to participate in 'auditory training' (see Cantril and Allport 2004). These claims for *positive* radio effects seem highly convincing if we imagine how a pre-broadcasting democracy would have operated.

Cultivation theory

A major weakness in all these early behaviourist approaches to media effects so far considered has been their narrow focus on short-term effects. In response, the work of George Gerbner and his associates has sought to measure the long-term effects of 'television's contributions to conceptions of social reality' (Gerbner et al. 1986: 37). **Cultivation theory** suggests that television – although the theory can be applied to other media too – is such an important source of information and entertainment that viewers cannot escape its gradual encroachment into their everyday lives: 'The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment' (Gerbner et al. 1986: 18). The idea that television cultivates the minds of viewers over long periods of time applies particularly to heavy viewers and also children who have grown up with an omnipresent television (or televisions) in their homes. For children, 'continued exposure to [television's] messages is likely to reiterate, confirm, and nourish (i.e. cultivate) their values and perspectives' (Gerbner et al. 1986: 23–4). Cultivation theory involves three types of analysis:

1. *Institutional process analysis*, which is concerned with 'all major powers, roles and relationships that have a systematic and generalized influence on how messages will be selected, formulated, and transmitted' (Gerber 1973: 559). The production and distribution of a televised sporting event can be analysed in respect of how decisions are made and power is exercised.
2. *Message system analysis*, which is basically extensive content analysis of media productions such as children's television programmes.
3. *Cultivation analysis* (see Gerbner et al. 1980), which involves longitudinal surveys of people's opinions on certain subjects with the key variable being levels of media reception (e.g. television viewing). Variations in conceptions of social reality ('the outside world') held by heavy and light viewers are measured to obtain the 'cultivation differential'.

Following analysis of several empirical studies that emerged from a wider research project called 'cultural indicators', the 'cultivation differential' was deemed to be significant – heavy television viewers think differently to light viewers about the world they live in. One example of cultivation theory in practice concerns conceptions of crime. Message system analysis of US television from 1969 until the 1980s revealed that 'Crime in prime time is at least 10 times as rampant as in the real world' (Gerbner et al. 1986: 26). Heavy exposure to the crime-ridden world of television, according to cultivation analysis, is likely to lead to a 'Mean World syndrome' effect in which viewers

learn that most people should not be trusted and that crime is rampant in every neighbourhood (Gerbner et al. 1986: 28). Mean World syndrome is only likely to spread slowly over a population of television viewers but, as the authors point out, 'It takes but a few degrees shift in the average temperature to have an ice age' (Gerbner et al. 1986: 21). Furthermore, their concept of 'mainstreaming' makes the claim that media influences on people's conceptions of reality can potentially 'absorb or override differences in perspectives and behaviour that stem from other social, cultural and demographic influences' (Gerbner et al. 1986: 31). Television's mainstreaming effects may cultivate a homogenization of divergent views because the medium is intended to appeal to broad audience interests. As discussed earlier, Cantril considered radio broadcasting to be a force for democracy, but Gerbner fears that television broadcasting excludes diverse opinions and dissident voices. The mainstream institutional characteristics and interests of television, then, may over time reflect the characteristics and interests of its like-minded audience. Television provides a guide and offers a 'television answer' to the question of how to act and behave in the world outside.

These are powerful claims for television's long-term effects on how we view the world we live in. In line with earlier theories of media effects, cultivation theory aims to understand the social and psychological processes that characterize vulnerable media audiences. Emphasis has shifted, though, away from uneducated listeners or delinquent child viewers to heavy media consumers. A recent psychological account of how television is damaging children echoes Gerbner's theoretical concerns:

> Children now spend more time watching a television screen than they spend in school. At this very moment, the average 6-year-old child will have already watched for nearly one full year of their lives. In fact, most of our children now literally have more eye contact with television characters than with their own parents.
>
> (Sigman 2005: 2)

More worryingly, children under three years of age who are exposed to indiscriminate television viewing are more likely to suffer from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) later in childhood (Sigman 2005: 16). Evidence to support these bold assertions is by no means comprehensive but if they prove to be accurate – and we do not know just how accurate these claims are right now – the public health consequences in terms of human behaviour abnormalities are unfolding in front of our eyes.

Agenda-setting and social functions of media

A not dissimilar body of work to cultivation theory, known as the agenda-setting approach (see McCombs and Shaw 1972), also deploys extensive

content analysis to show that 'Through their routine structuring of social and political reality, the news media influence the agenda of public issues around which political campaigns and voter decisions are organized' (McCombs and Gilbert 1986: 4). Like cultivation theory, the agenda-setting approach seeks to uncover long-term – not short-term – media effects. **Agenda-setting theory** has evolved from a longer theoretical tradition concerned with how public opinion is shaped by media representations of 'the world outside' (see Lippmann 1922). Journalists in particular influence public opinion according to the salience they give to certain news items. Newspaper stories, for example, are selected and ordered in accordance with certain news values. Those stories deemed the most newsworthy are given front-page coverage and large headlines; less newsworthy stories are placed further back in the newspaper and given less print space. Agenda-setting theory 'asserts that audiences acquire these saliences from the news media, incorporating similar sets of weights into their own agendas' (McCombs and Gilbert 1986: 4). Four rhetorical cues affect the agenda-setting process by drawing audience attention to the salience of particular news items (McCombs and Gilbert 1986: 7–8):

1. *Frequency of repetition*: the 'rolling' news story is deemed to be salient.
2. *The prominence with which items are displayed*: headline news, by definition, is assumed to have greater significance than *smaller* news stories.
3. *The degree of conflict present in the news item*: political scandals are more newsworthy than political consensus, for example.
4. *The framing of a news item – in what context and when it appears*: summer holiday weekends are often a cue to talk about excessive teenage alcohol consumption, for instance.

The basic conclusion drawn by Maxwell McComb and other agenda-setting theorists is that any given media agenda will give rise to a public agenda over the course of time. Figure 2.4 illustrates this idea.



Figure 2.4 Agenda-setting role of the mass media

Source: From McCombs (2004: 5)

Empirical research findings to test out the agenda-setting approach found that four months was the optimum span of time between presentation of a

media agenda and it having filtered across to the public realm (Stone and McCombs 1981). Another finding from the agenda-setting approach was the salience of media *images* over *issues* for readers, in response to the editorial decisions of newspaper journalists to foreground photography. Perhaps a positive outcome of agenda setting, though, is the suggestion that news media can set the agenda in relation to political participation, 'raising the level of political interest among the general public above the threshold sufficient to assure reasonable learning about issues and candidates' (McCombs and Gilbert 1986: 11). Political apathy, the authors argue, can be remedied by exposure to a political news agenda. This is an interesting hypothesis but we might speculate sceptically that excessive political coverage is likely to 'burn out' some sections of news audiences.

Prior to agenda-setting studies, the seeds of this theoretical approach were sown by a well-known essay by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton (first published in 1948) that outlined three social functions of mass media. First, media serve a 'status conferral function': 'The mass media *confer* status on public issues, persons, organizations and social movements' (Lazarsfeld and Merton 2004: 233). Clearly, people who feature in media coverage are elevated to a certain status or standing among their audience. Fashion designers who are asked to comment on this year's designs at the Paris Fashion Week for a radio news bulletin, for example, are likely to find their status enhanced (conferred upon them) by such media appearances. A second function of media is 'the enforcement of social norms': 'The mass media may initiate organized social action by "exposing" conditions which are at variance with public moralities' (Lazarsfeld and Merton 2004: 234). One recent example of this has been the crusade against asylum seekers by several newspapers in Britain, notably the *Daily Mail*. The *Daily Mail* is one of Britain's biggest-selling news titles and – according to this social function of media – may well owe its success to such moral crusades: 'The triumphant crusade may enhance the power and prestige of the mass medium' (Lazarsfeld and Merton 2004: 235). Third and finally, media serve a 'narcotizing dysfunction' in the sense that they occupy audience time to such an extent that little time is left for organized social and political action. This idea that media make their audiences drowsy and passive is not dissimilar to Adorno's perspective on the culture industry (see Chapter 7).

Two-step flow and the phenomenistic approach

Perhaps the first major rebuttal to theories of media effects was a study of how people influence the flow of mass media messages. *Personal Influence* (1955) – using a similar anthropological approach to the Lynds' *Middletown* (1929) as discussed in Chapter 3 – reported the findings of small-group and broader survey research on how women in Decatour, Illinois, communicated with

each other amid this flow of media communications. The authors, Elihu Katz and the aforementioned Lazarsfeld, begin by suggesting how Lasswell's formula fails to distinguish individuals from media institutions:

> it now has become increasingly clear that the individual person who reads something and talks about it with other people cannot be taken simply as a simile for social entities like newspapers or magazines. He himself [*sic*] needs to be studied in his two-fold capacity as a communicator and as a relay point in the network of mass communications.
>
> (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955: 1)

Lasswell's chain of communication (as we discussed earlier) is based on the principle that media messages will be passed from an institutional source to person A, and from person A to person B, and so on, in a relatively straightforward sequence. On the contrary, Katz and Lazarsfeld set out to study the flow of media messages using what they call impact analysis, which compares the role of opinion leaders to the role of media in influencing individuals' decision-making processes.

We must all know one or two opinion leaders among friends and family members with whom we intermingle. They are those people who have an opinion on everything; who lead conversations as if talking came naturally; who might be otherwise called the 'movers and shakers' among their party. Katz and Lazarsfeld's study identified the impact of opinion leaders among the women of Decatour and found that 'opinion leaders seemed to be distributed in all occupational groups, and on every social and economic level' (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955: 32). So opinion leaders are found in all walks of life and, moreover, they tend to expose themselves to media messages more so than less opinionated individuals. These findings lead the authors to a model that they refer to as the **two-step flow** in which 'ideas, often, seem to flow *from* radio and print *to* opinion leaders and *from them* to the less active sections of the population' (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955: 32). Unlike Lasswell's formula, the 'two-step flow' model affords greater influence to individual recipients of mass communications and rejects the notion that mass media messages simply flow – like waves – over their recipients, from one sequence to the next. An opinion leader not only transfers media messages to others; he or she selects and adapts these messages in line with their own agenda. As such, opinion leaders are located between media institutions and the rest of society. Paradoxically, an opinion leader is 'a group member playing a key communications role' (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955: 33), acting as a gatekeeper between media and the majority public.

This 'two-step flow' theory is markedly different from 'stimulus-response' theories of media effects encountered previously. Its central argument – that

face-to-face, interpersonal relations intervene in the flow of media communications from transmission to reception – contrasts with earlier studies that assume media power to be directly exerted upon 'the atomized masses'. Another author who questions hypodermic syringe theories of direct effects is Joseph Klapper, who considers approaches such as the two-step flow model as heralding a shift *away* from the tendency to regard mass communication as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, toward a view of the media as influences, working amid other influences, in a total situation (Klapper 1960: 5). Mass media, he argues, cannot be viewed in isolation from all the other influences that cause human beings to change their behaviour, attitudes or actions. What Klapper calls his **phenomenistic approach** is still interested in how media generate a stimulus to which audiences might respond, but now the focus is on 'the role of that stimulus in a total observed phenomenon' (Klapper 1960: 5) rather than on a laboratory approach in which a stimulus acts alone, in an artificial situation.

Klapper's phenomenistic approach proposes that media in most cases do not cause effects on their audiences but instead function as one component along a spectrum of mediating factors which 'are more likely to reinforce than to change' people's behaviour and attitudes (Klapper 1960: 8). Mediating factors incorporate a range of phenomena – such as family customs, politics and religion, as well as mass media – that influence people's opinions and attitudes (Klapper 1960: 47–52). The five main mediating factors are:

1. *An individual's predisposed opinions and how these predispositions tend to mean they use media in selective ways*: for example, an individual who dislikes sentimental melodrama is unlikely to watch soap operas on television.
2. *The group to which the individual belongs and how the predispositions of this group impact on the individual's predisposed opinions*: for example, classmates often share the same taste in music through peer-group influence.
3. *Interpersonal dissemination of media content*: the assumption here is that like-minded people talk to each other about the films they watch and the news they read about. Everyday conversations on such matters tend to limit dramatic individual changes in behaviour or opinions.
4. *Opinion leadership*: reminiscent of the 'two-step flow' model, Klapper argues that opinion leaders tend to use media messages to reinforce their predisposed opinions rather than to simply relay what these messages have to say.
5. *The role of mass media in a free enterprise society*: given the prerequisite economic imperatives to please both advertisers and audiences, media institutions tend to produce content based on successful

formulas rather than try out more innovative content and run the risk of alienating their stakeholders.

These five mediating factors identified by Klapper's phenomenistic approach – particularly the fifth one – mark a clear break from more traditional effects theories. The implication is that the only perceivable effect of mass media on its selective-viewing audience is to tell them what they already think and feel – not to change their behaviour or actions in any way. We have made a giant theoretical leap, therefore, from direct media effects (Lasswell and Wertham) to limited media effects (Katz and Lazarsfeld, Klapper) perspectives.

Uses and gratifications theory

Behaviourist media theories that cast doubt on the idea of effects provided the impetus for an antithetical approach to traditional effects research known as **uses and gratifications**. The work that emerged from this theoretical approach considers how media fulfil the needs and gratifications of their users. The assumption is that audiences use media – not vice versa. In other words, the tables have turned for theories of media effects. The underlying logic of the uses and gratifications approach amounts to 'an assessment of media consumption in audience-related terms, rather than in technological, aesthetic, ideological, or other more or less "elitist" terms' (Katz et al. 1974: 21). Audience requirements are considered to be a major intervening factor in the study of media effects and it is argued that 'media researchers ought to be studying human needs to discover how much the media do or do not contribute to their creation and satisfaction' (Katz et al. 1974: 30). We have moved from the language of 'effects' to that of 'needs'. Uses and gratifications theory has had a significant influence on theories of consumerism (see Chapter 9) but it better belongs within a discussion of behaviourism given its emphasis on the psychological dimensions of media use.

Uses and gratifications theory is concerned with the following:

1 Social and psychological origins of . . .
2 needs, which generate . . .
3 expectations of . . .
4 the mass media or other sources, which lead to . . .
5 differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in . . .
6 needs gratifications and . . .
7 other unintended consequences.

(Katz et al. 1974: 20)

According to this set of theoretical concerns, audiences go looking for certain types of media messages in order to fulfil existing needs. Certain individuals

may enjoy television sitcoms (situation comedies), for example, because they help them to 'wind down' and feel good after a hard day's work. The need precedes the effect, meaning that the media effects are bound to be beneficial (sitcoms affect laughter) rather than malign. Media use is therefore goal-oriented and the audience is always active in seeking out needs gratifications. Unlike stimulus-response theories of direct effects, uses and gratifications theory does not assume media to be omnipotent and all-consuming: 'The media compete with other sources of need satisfaction' (Katz et al. 1974: 22). Music media use can be applied quite convincingly to this theoretical assumption. Music is often a soundtrack to other activities that satisfy needs, such as eating and drinking, or taking a bath, or even having sexual intercourse!

Numerous studies have tested out the idea of uses and gratifications, several of which can be found in the pioneering collection associated with this theory (see Blumler and Katz 1974). Although uses and gratifications theory has helped to correct the extremities of direct effects theories, it has been accused of being at the opposite extreme of the behaviourist spectrum, even by theorists that have adopted some of its assumptions. In particular, the approach is criticized for presupposing that media *can* satisfy needs rather than considering the possibility that media use may elude gratifications. As such, the theory 'smacks of a mere defence of the media operators' oldest argument: "We only give the people what they want"' (Carey and Kreiling 1974: 230). Moreover, uses and gratifications theory tends to 'ignore all the problems associated with the differential distribution of power and opportunity in society' (Elliott 1974: 254). There is also a more philosophical question about what exactly constitutes the 'needs' of human beings, and whether or not these needs are common to everyone or unique to individuals. We might also ask whether it is still plausible in our media-saturated world to suggest that people's needs emerge prior to media use and are not shaped in any way at the point of use. Media agendas may not necessarily set public agendas but they may at least affect them in some small measure. The uses and gratifications approach – along with Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model – represents a significant turn in behaviourist media theory but, given the shortcomings that gratifications researchers themselves have identified, it was to signal a decline in theories of behaviourism as other avenues of inquiry opened up.

Summary

This chapter has considered:

- The origins and motives of behaviourist media theory and effects research.
- Lasswell's chain of communication – 'who says what in which

channel to whom with what effect' – and its application to his analysis of war propaganda techniques.

- Direct effects perspectives, evident in Lasswell's work and in Wertham's vitriolic account of the psychological problems created by violent comics and television.
- Cantril's theory of indirect media effects that reinforce, but do not create, the social problems that are more direct causes of personal susceptibility to panic.
- Cultivation theory's analysis of long-term media effects on human behaviour, including the concept of mainstreaming.
- Theories and research into agenda-setting and social functions of media that show how public opinion and public issues are shaped by news agendas.
- Two-step flow and phenomenistic approaches that challenge theories of media effects by identifying the impact of opinion leaders and other mediating factors in affecting how media messages are received by the majority public.
- The uses and gratifications approach which claims that individuals use media in the expectation that they will fulfil inherent psychological needs.

Further reading

Barker, M. and Petley, J. (eds) (2001) *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate*, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

An edited collection of articles on a range of contemporary 'effects' issues and debates, including women's responses to violent films and – interestingly – the media-led crusade against 'trendy media studies' in the 1990s. Suitable for all media students.

Bryant, J. and Thompson, S. (2002) *Fundamentals of Media Effects*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

A useful and comprehensive introduction to media effects theory and research. Key areas of research such as media effects on health and news effects are explored in depth. Suitable for all media students.

Gauntlett, D. (2005) *Moving Experiences: Media Effects and Beyond*, 2nd edn. Eastleigh: John Libbey.

A revised edition of this polemical critique of media effects studies. Chapters

on screen media and violence, pro-social media effects, and campaigns and advertising, as well as the author's own 'creative methods' approach. Suitable for all media students.

Macklin, M. C. and Carlson, L. (eds) (1999) *Advertising to Children: Concepts and Controversies*. London: Sage.

An edited collection of articles that deal with what children think about ads and societal concerns about ads aimed at children. Recommended for advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.

3 Modernity and medium theory

Introduction

In this chapter we will chart some key media theories related to the broad theme of **modernity**. Central to discussion will be the most significant and controversial contribution to our understanding of media in modern times – **medium theory**. The term 'modernity' is generally understood to refer to the social, economic, political and technological developments that have characterized the transition from traditional (pre-modern) to advanced (modern) civilizations. Figure 3.1 outlines the main features of modernity in contrast to traditional societies. However, what particular developments best capture the characteristics of modernity in any given culture or society are contested. Some theorists emphasize capitalist principles and institutions as the key factors of modernity (e.g. McGuigan 2006) while others point to the importance of secularization and instrumental rationality (e.g. Turner 1990). The history of modernity is contested too. It is sometimes aligned to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment – also known as the Age of Reason – and sometimes to the spread of Western imperialism in the sixteenth century. It has also been dated as far back as the fourth century (Kroker and Cook 1988) but, for the purposes of media theory, it suffices to situate the emergence of modernity somewhere around the second half of the fifteenth century along with the invention and expansion of the first mechanical media technology – the printing press.

Modernity (modern societies)	Pre-modernity (traditional societies)
Capitalism/Markets	Subsistence
Industrial	Agricultural
Urban	Rural
Bureaucracy	Aristocracy
Science	Religion/Superstition
Rational	Emotional
Rule of Law	Barbarism (lawlessness)
Culture	Nature
Literacy	Oral Society
Individualistic	Communal/Tribal

Figure 3.1 Characteristics of modernity and pre-modernity

Marshall Berman (1988) refers to three phases of modernity: first, the start of the sixteenth century in which 'people are just beginning to experience modern life'; second, a revolutionary age beginning in the 1790s with the French Revolution and running into the nineteenth century when 'a great modern public abruptly and dramatically comes to life'; and third, the twentieth-century globalization of modern life coupled with the rise of **modernism** as a radical art form (Berman 1988: 16–17). The second phase is especially significant to the growth of 'daily newspapers, telegraphs, telephones and other mass media, communicating on an ever wider scale' (Berman 1988: 19). It was the vast expansion of modernization in the name of industrial capitalism that heralded the culture of modernism. Modernism is not the same as modernity. Modernism refers specifically to 'the experimental art and writing of c.1890–c.1940' (Williams 1983a: 208). Modernist art, literature and criticism are centred on the idea that individual creativity is threatened by a hostile environment of oppressive politics, advanced economies, technologies and other social forces, including mass media. Although modernity and modernism have different meanings, this chapter interweaves ideas from both media theorists of modernity and modernist critics of media. This is because the art of modernism can be understood as a response to the social consequences of modernity. For media theory in general but the specialist field of medium theory in particular, the rapid development of mass media technologies is the most pressing aspect of modernity. In contrast to many other perspectives, however, medium theory assumes technology to be a powerful and mostly positive force for social change.

Innis: *The Bias of Communication*

The first medium theorist, Harold Innis, draws on historical evidence to outline a theory about what he calls the bias inherent to media technologies. Any medium of communication will be biased towards its utility either across time or space:

> Media that emphasize time are those that are durable in character, such as parchment, clay or stone. The heavy materials are suited to the development of architecture and sculpture. Media that emphasize space are apt to be less durable and light in character, such as papyrus and paper. The latter are suited to wide areas in administration and trade.
>
> (Innis 1986: 5)

It might seem odd to think about stone and paper as media of communication, but historically these materials were among the only forms of media

available for communicating messages. Stone's utility was biased towards time; paper's towards space. Innis argues that empires of power – both political and economic – 'persist by overcoming the bias of media which overemphasizes either dimension' (Innis 1986: 5). This bias needs to be overcome in order for empires to rule through a combination of centralized and decentralized power. Media biased towards *time* concerns (like stone) serve to keep economic and political power within centres of bureaucratic authority, but empires can only maintain their power by delegating some of it to external agencies. Therefore, media biased towards *space* concerns (like paper) help to decentralize and spread an empire's power. According to Innis, institutions such as governments and big businesses have used a mix of media communications to accomplish and protect their power.

Innis extends his theory of media bias to the issue of how knowledge and information are disseminated in societies. He uses historical examples to show that the *medium* through which knowledge and information is circulated has more impact on societies than the character or *content* of that knowledge or information. As such, media technologies determine human affairs to the extent that new technologies can create new ways of living: 'the advantages of a new medium will become such as to lead to the emergence of a new civilization' (Innis 1951: 34). His main evidence for this argument is the historical shift from oral to written communication that was set in motion by Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in Germany circa 1450. Prior to the printing press, the Medieval Church in Europe enjoyed a monopoly over religious information in the form of hand-written scribes that were slow and expensive to reproduce. In 1453, the first print version of the Bible – now known as the Gutenberg Bible – helped to destabilize this monopoly. Printing and paper technologies enabled versions of the Bible to be disseminated much more widely than previously. Ordinary, god-fearing people were encouraged to become literate (i.e. able to read written communications) and for the first time Christian beliefs could be gleaned first hand, rather than from more corruptible second-hand sources such as clergymen. The central power once exercised by the Church via time-biased media was consequentially weakened by the spatial bias of print media that led to a vast decentralization of power to Christian people.

Innis's theory finds support from at least two noteworthy studies that followed him. First, Walter J. Ong (1993) suggests that literate cultures which emerged in the wake of print technologies developed different sensory experiences than traditional, oral cultures. For instance, oral memory by necessity was highly sophisticated and frequently drawn on. By contrast, the ability to read and 'write down' information – to produce a material record of that information – reduced the necessity for and capacity of human memory exertions. Less reliance on human memory is inextricably linked to the decentralizing power of space-biased print media. Second, Benedict Anderson

(1991) argues that the printing press helped to develop what he calls 'print-languages' which assembled the vernacular of different dialects into the accepted linguistic code of a nation. In turn, print technology and capitalist economics 'created the possibility of a new form of imagined community' (Anderson 1991: 46) in which local communities became united through a common language and national identity. Innis is not without his critics, however. The idea that media technologies *in themselves* determine social, political, economic and religious change – that they have a life of their own beyond the human beings that invent and use them – is far from convincing. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein's (1979) far more comprehensive history of the printing press is highly critical of 'the sweeping and sensational claims made by Innis and McLuhan' (Eisenstein 1979: 171) that, she argues, lack historical context. The second name mentioned by Eisenstein is Innis's best-known student, Marshall McLuhan, whose even more emphatic claim that technology revolutionizes society is considered now.

McLuhan: the medium is the message

McLuhan is perhaps the only media theorist to have become a media celebrity. During the height of his fame he even played a cameo role in Woody Allen's acclaimed film, *Annie Hall* (1977). Beginning with Innis's ideas about the impact of the printing press on information monopolies, McLuhan's medium theory states that any advanced modern society is shaped by the various media technologies that are available to it. Media have powerful effects on societies. Moreover, media become extensions of ourselves; extensions of our human senses. What matters, then, is not the content of these media technologies but the technologies themselves. Take television, for instance. It matters not in the least whether we refer to a soap opera, a news bulletin, a serial drama, a documentary, and so forth. What matters is the medium, not the message, because 'the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs' (McLuhan 1964: 8). In other words, the messages contained in any medium are inseparable from the medium's human consequences, and it is these consequences that matter most. Therefore, '"the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action' (McLuhan 1964: 9). Television, then, is an electrical medium that transmits sequences of audio-visual material across vast distances (and sometimes across nations) to its viewers. Televisual images and sounds are the messages sent out by television. What those images show or those sounds emit are inconsequential to the grander scheme of things in which television transformed patterns of leisure, domestic life, education and – for those employed by television and its related industries – work.

We can best understand McLuhan's medium theory by examining how it compares the properties of different media. McLuhan's principal distinction is between 'hot media' and 'cold media'. Hot media require low levels of audience participation because they 'extend one single sense in "high definition"' and are 'well filled with data' (McLuhan 1964: 22). A typical photograph, for example, requires little effort in defining what it represents. A cartoon, in comparison, is a cold medium because – with less visual data – it requires higher levels of sensory participation (i.e. eye work) in order to be defined. A similar distinction can be drawn between film and television. Film is a hotter medium than television because its richer visual resolution requires lower audience participation. The celluloid and projection technologies of film, McLuhan claims, provide high-definition visual data in comparison to the scan lines transmitted through television. Even high-definition television (HDTV), while hotter than standard television images, cannot compete with the heat of 35-millimetre movie images. You have to work harder as a television *viewer* than a film *spectator*. Some other hot and cold media comparisons are listed in Figure 3.2.

HOT media	versus	COLD media
Photograph		Cartoon
Film		Television
Radio		Telephone
Tabloid newspaper		Broadsheet newspaper
Lecture		Seminar/Tutorial class

Figure 3.2 Hot and cold media

McLuhan argues that this distinction in the properties of different media technologies effectively shapes how we use and learn from them. Hot media tend to function as easily forgotten and highly disposable entertainment forms; cold media, by contrast, afford greater capacity for learning because they require higher levels of sensory participation, concentration and literacy skills. This distinction is thoughtful but – to be critical – does not always allow for clear-cut examples. The internet, for instance, requires higher levels of participation (including computer literacy skills) than television in one sense, but in another sense – speed of information – it requires less participation. If I want to know the news headlines, the internet is likely to involve the least participation in terms of time because television news headlines only appear at intervals (every 15 minutes on rolling news channels typically). The internet is therefore a hotter medium than television in some sense and a cooler medium in another.

McLuhan's emphasis on (hot or cold) medium over message, format over

content can appear somewhat abstract and is certainly open to debate. Before we address some criticisms of medium theory, though, we should consider McLuhan's argument in a wider historical context. We tend to take television for granted today, but it is a relatively recent media technology that only became widespread in developed countries during the middle of the twentieth century, and in many developing countries a good deal later. The impact television made on human actions and behaviour – as we discussed in the previous chapter – is still difficult to measure, and could only really have been felt by a particular generation of people who witnessed its advent and subsequently adopted it. So imagine an event like the one that occurred on September 11th 2001. Two planes crash into the twin towers of the World Trade Center. How did the vast majority of the world's population experience this event? Of course, they watched the shocking images on television. But what if an event similar to 9/11 had occurred in 1801 rather than 2001? The event (and the message sent out by its terrorist perpetrators) would have still been shocking to hear about, but 'hear about it' – through word-of-mouth or, if we were wealthy and educated, reading about it in a newspaper – is all we could have done, because in 1801 television and other electrical media did not exist. The medium is the message here in the sense that the medium through which a message is sent to its receiver dictates the power of that message. Today's media technologies are, on the whole but with a few exceptions, hotter than yesteryear's cool technologies.

Like Innis's theory of media bias, McLuhan's medium theory can only be understood through an historical lens. Medium theory is inseparable from the processes of modernity undergone by advanced industrial societies. McLuhan refers to three eras of media history within the wider context of modernity (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 McLuhan's media history of modernity

Era	*Type of medium*	*Dominant medium*	*Time period (approximate)*
Tribal	Oral (word-of-mouth)	Speech/song	Before 1500
Detribalization	Mechanical	Print	1500–1900
Retribalization	Electrical	Television	After 1900

Prior to the invention of the printing press, a tribal era holds sway. Human beings communicate with each other through media of speech and song. Oral literacy is the only type required. Gutenberg's invention, as discussed earlier, changes the course of media history and sets the wheels in motion for modernity. Print media – books, pamphlets, letters – begin to dominate human communications and more traditional notions of literary

(reading and writing skills) become a requirement for social progress. As individuals and groups turn to the written word for cool instruction and education, an era of detribalization sets in. It is no longer necessary for people to live, speak, listen and be governed in the intimacy of tribal gatherings now that print media can be mass-produced and widely distributed. Detribalization brings with it, however, new forms of decentralized power and authority. Centres of power hoard new mechanical technologies in order to determine the content of books and other print media destined for 'the masses'. Before the French Revolution, print media disseminated by aristocratic powers succeeded in homogenizing France: 'Frenchmen were the same kind of people from north to south' (McLuhan 1964: 14). French culture and language were standardized throughout the nation from their Parisian stronghold.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, however, an era of retribalization has evolved in tandem with the electrical age of media communications. Telephone, television and the internet, for instance, are shrinking the world and bringing people closer together via audio and visual media. This is the inspiration behind another well-known phrase coined by McLuhan: 'the global village' (McLuhan and Fiore 2001). We no longer live in tribal villages in the literal sense, but in the metaphorical sense electrical media have expanded our horizons to such an extent that we feel a vicarious intimacy with people and places all over the world. The advent of the internet and email communications has helped to revive McLuhan's medium theory and specifically his ideas about an era of retribalization in today's global village. eBay, for example, is a McLuhan-esque web venture – The World's Online Marketplace – with its own virtual community (tribe) of buyers and sellers located in over thirty different countries. MySpace also resembles a global village in which users spatially distant from each other can converge – in a virtual sense – around common tastes and interests. Nonetheless, medium theory has undergone sustained criticism and McLuhan has as many opponents as exponents (see discussion of Williams later in this chapter). Particularly problematic is the assumption that media and communications technologies revolutionize all parts of social and economic life. This contradicts a theory of social exclusion which incorporates the idea that less affluent societies and social classes do not gain the same access to or benefit from technologies enjoyed by those who can afford to invest in them. eBay might be a boon to business enterprise in the 'markets' within which it operates, but it does nothing to improve the lives of would-be entrepreneurs in parts of the world without the necessary communications infrastructure.

One of McLuhan's exponents, Neil Postman (1987), begins with a sympathetic rendition of medium theory but applies it to a far more cynical picture of contemporary media influence. In contrast to the Age of Exposition – meaning 'thorough explanation' – so helpfully forged by print media, Postman argues that the invention of the electric telegraph in the United

States in 1837 signalled (no pun intended!) a new era – the Age of Show Business. The telegraph provided far faster communication across greater distances than any medium had done before. While McLuhan suggests that the telegraph catapulted society into a phase of mighty progress and advancement, Postman suggests that it attacked the literate culture nurtured by print media in 'introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence' (Postman 1987: 66). Unlike print communications such as letters, telegraphic messages tended to lack context or detail, did not answer complex questions or dilemmas, were often addressed to a general audience of no one in particular, and did not sufficiently afford the right to reply. Along with telegraphy, another new technology that became known as photography, likewise, brought with it an idiosyncratic series of responses: 'For countless Americans, seeing, not reading, became the basis for believing' (Postman 1987: 76). The Age of Show Business had arrived as image and sound-bite overcame the more cultured Age of Print. Like children, we have learnt to enjoy visual rather than textual pleasures and now live in a 'peek a boo world' that resists intellectual substance. Moreover, children are now more like adults. The past dominance of print media such as books required a schooling period for children in their intellectual development, but the Age of Show Business is equally accessible to child and adult alike, hence the disappearance of childhood (Postman 1983).

The main object of scorn for Postman is not telegraphy or photography but their offspring, television. Such is television's influence on contemporary life that it has created a new epistemology. 'Epistemology' is a complex term meaning a theory of knowledge, and more specifically, how we come to know about things that claim to be true. Television is 'an instrument that directs not only our knowledge of the world, but our knowledge of *ways of knowing* as well' (Postman 1987: 80). Television's epistemology is defined by its overriding feature as a medium – it is for our *vision* more so than any other human sense. And its audience sees countless images without any coherent structure (commercial breaks, for example) that function primarily as infantile entertainment. Television entertains even when the intention is to inform, such as during news bulletins:

> The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining . . . Everything about a news show tells us this – the good looks and amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the show . . . They are not assembling the news to be read, or broadcasting it to be heard. They are televising the news to be seen. They must follow where the medium leads.
>
> (Postman 1987: 89–90)

Television news values are based on the drama of spectacle; by contrast, the values of news print media can still be based on sustained, intellectual debate and dialogue. Postman fears that electrical technologies like television are effectively leading to 'culture-death'. Elsewhere, the author has suggested that the United States has become the first 'Technopoly', meaning it is the first nation that has submitted 'all forms of cultural life to the sovereignty of technique and technology' (Postman 1993: 52).

Benjamin: art and mechanical reproduction

Writing long before McLuhan and Innis, Walter Benjamin in his classic essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (first published in 1936) draws a similarly optimistic theory about the revolutionary qualities of media technologies. Benjamin considers that mechanical technologies, especially photography and film, have 'transformed the entire nature of art' (Benjamin 1973a: 220) rather than diminished it. This transformation is due to their reproducibility. Mass reproduction of art meant that, for example, great paintings such as the 'Mona Lisa' could be seen in a replica (i.e. photographic or filmic) form by millions of ordinary people – not just by a privileged class who owned or could afford to access these works of art. Reproduction comes at a price, however: 'Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be' (Benjamin 1973a: 214). Original works of art contain this missing element, which explains why they take on an 'aura' – a mystical sense of authenticity that makes them special and extremely sought after. This sense of aura is threatened, though, when an original work of art is reproduced on a mass scale (see Figure 3.3). The 'Mona Lisa' original is unlikely to be a first sighting of Leonardo da Vinci's painting for visitors to the Musée du Louvre in Paris today. The fascination has worn off to some extent. On the other hand, those people lucky enough to see the painting up close in the pre-mechanical age would have no doubt been awestruck in expectation at what they might see.

Benjamin's theory of aura is based on the claim that 'the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function' (1973a: 217). Original artistic productions are therefore experienced in ritual contexts, which means they acquire a set of customs and traditions associated with their existence. For example, paintings are experienced in art galleries; music is heard at concerts. By contrast, reproduced art – distributed through media technologies such as television or magazines – is freed from customary ritual and instead serves an exhibition function: 'With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products' (Benjamin 1973a: 218–19).

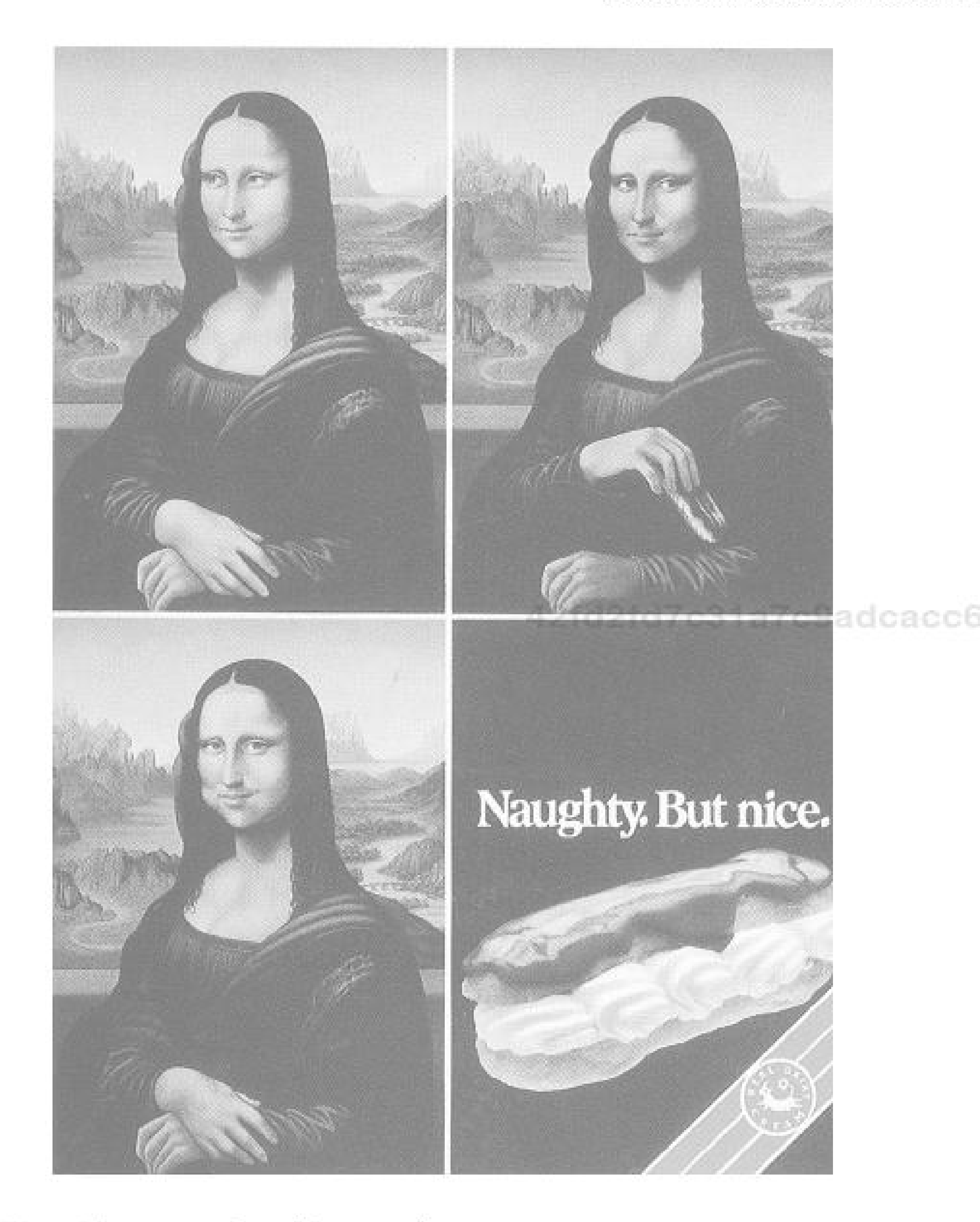


Figure 3.3 Mona Lisa reproduced in an ad

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, for instance, is no longer tied to the ritual of the concert hall – where a ticket might cost a month's wages – when it can be exhibited in the living room via CD or MP3. This transition from ritual to exhibition marks a simultaneous transition, moreover, from original use value (or 'cult value') to reproducible 'exhibition value'. What Benjamin means is that the use value of a mechanically-produced, original art work (its ownership value) is less significant than its exhibition value (its value as a commodity that can be distributed and sold in multiple copies). By the same token, an original Hollywood film recording is worth nothing in comparison to an original da Vinci painting, but the mass reproducibility of a Hollywood film – its exhibition value – can be very lucrative indeed.

What are the consequences of mass reproduction of art in modernity? According to Benjamin, art and cultural products more generally have become increasingly political. Freed from ritual contexts of aura and freed from the ownership of powerful elites, contemporary art forms such as

popular music – in all its recording formats – are produced and consumed by millions of people, sometimes to express oppositional politics in the face of oppressive regimes. Bertolt Brecht, the famous playwright and friend of Benjamin, produced and directed films for political ends. Informed by Benjamin's theories, he developed his own theories about the political purpose of art – particularly theatre and film – which in turn informed his friend (see Benjamin 1973b). Armed with new technologies, Brecht intended to change the way in which audiences responded to plays and films. His theory of alienation stated that audiences should be encouraged to become actively involved in what they watched; to think about and analyse situations; to take sides and hone opinions on controversial topics; and not to feel sympathy or empathy for characters or predicaments. Of course, Brecht had a political axe to grind – he was a communist whose Marxist sympathies are expressed in plays such as *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1949) – but through alienation, he sought to foster intellectual detachment in audiences so that they could make their own, informed political judgements (see Brecht 1979). The Marxist beliefs of Brecht and Benjamin were taboo in Germany during the rise of Hitler and fascism. Both men were forced to curtail their intellectual activities and, ultimately, had to flee their native country for fear of imprisonment and possible execution. Brecht escaped to the United States but Benjamin lost his life in 1940 while in exile in France.

A later adaptation of Benjamin's theories is John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972). Berger's argument is that today's flood of publicity and advertising images share much in common – their layout, motifs and messages – with eighteenth-century oil paintings. The major difference is that while oil paintings were once addressed to the 'spectator-owner', advertising images are addressed to the 'spectator-buyer':

> The oil painting was addressed to those who made money out of the market. Publicity is addressed to those who constitute the market, to the spectator-buyer who is also the consumer-producer from whom profits are made twice over – as worker and then as buyer. The only places relatively free of publicity are the quarters of the very rich; their money is theirs to keep.
>
> (Berger 1972: 142)

As this quote suggests, Berger has a dimmer view of publicity images than Benjamin's view of photography as a radical art form. Nonetheless, there is a political dimension to mass-reproduced advertisements, albeit a sinister one that favours those in power: 'Publicity turns consumption into a substitute for democracy. The choice of what one eats (or wears or drives) takes the place of a significant political choice. Publicity helps to mask and compensate for all that is undemocratic within society' (Berger 1972: 149). While Third World

countries see publicity images as symbols of free choice and democracy, the truth according to Berger is that advertising restricts choice and disengages Western people from serious political issues. Technology as a flagship feature of modernity is being used in dystopian rather than progressive, utopian ways. Brecht's revolutionary art is being directly challenged, then, by a profit-driven media culture of advertising, plugging and endorsements that deals more in candy and catharsis than intellect and politics (see discussion of Adorno in Chapter 7 for a similarly pessimistic account of technology from a political economy perspective).

The Leavises and the Lynds

Theories of modernity such as McLuhan's medium theory are indebted to a related but slightly different phenomenon known as 'modernism'. As discussed earlier, modernism is a literary and aesthetic tradition particularly associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Modernism, in stark contrast to medium theory, expresses cynicism about modernity and technology. Brecht's plays are modernist in their attack on fascism and rampant capitalist greed. Typically, a golden age of high morality and humanity is evoked in modernist art and juxtaposed with the barbarism of the present. Two key exponents of modernist criticism are F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, probably the most famous of all intellectual couples.

F. R. Leavis's modernist theories are based on the premise of an elite **minority culture** that he identifies as having emerged to counter the threat of banal, mass-produced entertainment:

> In any period it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends ... Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age.
>
> (F. R. Leavis 1930: 3, 5)

For F. R. Leavis, an elite group of educated cultural critics is paramount for the provision of moral guidance to mass civilization. Hollywood films, for the majority of their unthinking audience, 'involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals' (F. R. Leavis 1930: 10). This quote smacks of media effects, but it is rooted in a broader cultural theory about the forces of modernity. Cinema, radio, best-selling novels, large-circulation newspapers and magazines are, according to Q. D. Leavis (1932: 193), 'standardizing forces' that threaten intellectual culture. Popular

films and novels work to the same formula: they 'must promise romance or fail' (Q. D. Leavis 1932: 320). The Leavises are concerned with the 'levelling down' – or what is known these days as the 'dumbing down' – of popular culture via mass media. The authentic, poetic voice of what T. S. Eliot (1951) – another modernist – called the 'individual talent' has been usurped by the profit-seeking motives of capitalist-driven media corporations.

One of these profit-driven corporations under attack from the Leavises was Lord Northcliffe's popular newspaper press. The rise of Northcliffe's popular press in early twentieth-century Britain – evidenced by the *Daily Mail*, one of the first million-selling newspapers – may have given the public what they wanted, but not what was good for them. Northcliffe's news values were about eye-catching presentation and entertainment, as opposed to the serious politics and foreign affairs covered by broadsheet newspapers in the nineteenth century. While 'The old journalist was controlled by a sense of the dignity of his [*sic*] profession', by contrast 'the modern "cynical", cheaply sophisticated journalist who gives the public what it wants is, and considers himself, a businessman, and he has precisely the same code and outlook as the next man who is out to sell his goods' (Q. D. Leavis 1932: 181). This business-like style of the new journalism was grounded in sensational human interest and crime stories that appealed, the Leavises argued, to the base emotions of uneducated readers. Economic interests held sway over moral standards. Northcliffe was the first press baron to set advertising rates in proportion to circulation figures. Following the success of the *Daily Mail*, Northcliffe took control of several other newspapers including *The Times* during an inter-war period that witnessed intense concentration of press ownership. This led to the decline of provisional newspapers and – to prove the Leavises' point – increased standardization of editorial content and decision-making in the interests of sales and advertising revenue.

The cheap values represented by Britain's commercial press were symptomatic of wider American cultural and economic influences. The fear of Americanization as a pervasive feature of modernity is perceived by F. R. Leavis in the pages of a book written by anthropologists Robert and Helen Lynd called *Middletown* (1929):

> There we see in detail how the automobile (to take one instance) has, in a few years, radically affected religion, broken up the family, and revolutionized social custom. Change has been so catastrophic that the generations find it hard to adjust themselves to each other, and parents are helpless to deal with their children.
>
> (F. R. Leavis 1930: 6)

The implication is that Americanization in all its cultural and media forms – automobiles, Hollywood films, and so on – will drift across the Atlantic to

Britain and beyond (see Hebdige 1989). The book being referred to is an ethnographic account of everyday life during the 1920s in a place given the pseudonym 'Middletown', which was in fact the small city of Muncie, Indiana, in the United States. Rather than simply detailing the customs and habits of Middletown at a given period in history, though, the Lynds compared their own research with similar ethnographic data gathered in the same town during the year 1890. Interestingly, Lynd and Lynd are able to compare an age when mass media had only a limited presence in the lives of Middletown's residents (i.e. 1890) with a period of history 35 years later when the impact of radio, cinema and phonograph – as well as the expansion of print media – were growing in prominence within American culture. According to the authors, these new mass media were re-making leisure in Middletown by standardizing people's pastimes and outlooks on the world beyond their community. Unlike life in 1890, Middletown leisure pursuits in the 1920s were more passive and less creative. Organizational forms of leisure such as sports and music clubs were being superseded by the lure of movies and automobiles.

The advent of media technologies in Middletown had ultimately shifted people's leisure-time from public to semi-public or private activities. Popular leisure pursuits such as travelling in cars and listening to the radio had a 'decentralizing tendency' in drifting away from community-based clubs and organizations in favour of 'individual, family or small group affairs' (Lynd and Lynd 1929: 265). In addition to this 'decentralizing tendency', media were impacting in two other important and interrelated ways in the lives of Middletown's inhabitants. At the same time that technologies such as radio were affecting a standardization of habits and opinions, by letting in the outside world they also had the beneficial effect of 'rolling back the horizons' and 'lifting Middletown out of the humdrum of everyday' (Lynd and Lynd 1929: 269, 271). McLuhan's retribalized global village, it would appear, was at least tangible in a small, 1920s American city. The authors suggest that media influences on Middletown are considerable, stating that 'these space-binding leisure-time inventions imported from without – automobile, motion picture, and radio – [are] reshaping the city' (Lynd and Lynd 1929: 271). To some extent this 'reshaping of the city' is a positive development in that it enables individuals to educate themselves in politics and world affairs. On the negative side, though, external influences are diluting the local character of places like Middletown. In 1890, it was better able to display its peculiarities, but by the 1920s, Middletown – both the place and the people – was being reshaped into an American city like any other. It seems like McLuhan failed to account for this dark side of the global village. The modernist fears of the Leavises are largely realized, therefore, in the Lynds's account of how forces of modernity – particularly new media and communications technologies – are threatening traditions and standardizing people's lives.

Riesman and Hoggart: other-directed character and its uses of literacy

Modernity's darker side is also evidenced in theories of mass media and culture, including two seminal works from either side of the Atlantic: David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (first published in 1950) and Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (first published in 1957). Both books are concerned with the consequences of widespread public literacy brought on by both mass media technologies and an ostensibly progressive facet of modernity, namely the expansion of education. Riesman identifies three types of 'direction' in the character of American people that have evolved during the course of modernity:

1. *Tradition-direction*: this condition was typical in early America. Lack of social mobility means that individuals remain tied to fixed clans and castes (social classes), and behavioural conformity is a social expectation.
2. *Inner-direction*: increased personal mobility, expansion of wealth and new employment opportunities characterize this type. Direction is 'inner' because an individual's role in society is 'implanted early in life by elders' (Riesman 1961: 15).
3. *Other-direction*: this type of direction is prevalent in contemporary America. Inner-directed patterns of discipline and family values are displaced as individuals become directed towards 'others' of their own age and background (i.e. peers) as well as the influences of media and popular culture.

Other-directed character 'types' are indicative of a young generation of metropolitan, middle-class Americans – well-educated and highly literate – working in service and financial industries. However, within the realm of leisure and consumption, Riesman considers the other-directed to be inferior to the inner-directed character. Inner-directedness is guided by didactic training and good practice, such as playing a game of chess. With other-directedness, on the other hand, 'mass media serve as tutors' and effectively replace parents, teachers and other elders (Riesman 1961: 290). Instead of productive leisure pursuits, emphasis is directed towards what Riesman calls 'consumership' – which film to watch, which album to buy.

Being a good consumer is vital for other-directed individuals in securing peer-group approval. Other-directed types exhibit 'an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others' (Riesman 1961: 22) which leads to behavioural conformity. Unlike tradition-directed conformity that was an expectation instilled from positions of authority, however, other-directed

conformity is a social contract that people accept voluntarily. Elsewhere, Riesman's theory of other-directed character is evidenced in research on teenage popular music consumption (Riesman 1990). He analysed interviews with teenagers about their music tastes and drew a distinction between a majority and a minority audience. Differences in how the two groups listened to and talked about popular music are shown in Figure 3.4.

Majority	**Minority**
Pop bands and star singers	Underground /'hot' jazz
Passive	Active
Peer-group conformity	Peer-group rejection
Commercial tastes	Alternative (non-commercial) tastes
Conservative	Rebellious
Value-free judgement	High standards of technical judgement

Figure 3.4 Majority and minority audiences for popular music

As we can see from these differences, the majority of teenagers listen to popular music in an other-directed manner: 'The functions of music for this group are *social* – the music gives them something to talk or kid about with friends' (Riesman 1990: 8). For young people keen to join the majority audience along with their peers 'the fear is to be caught liking what the others have decided not to like' (Riesman 1990: 12). In stark contrast, the minority audience is critical of both the majority attitude and expresses a 'resentment of the image of the teenager provided by the mass media' (Riesman 1990: 10). Although the comparison is not strictly a fair one, we can nevertheless see similarities in Riesman's minority audience and the minority culture expounded by the Leavises in the fight against standardized mass entertainment.

Hoggart, like Riesman, examines popular music and its impact on vulnerable people, and more specifically, the working-class youth of Britain (especially industrial northern England). The increasingly literate and wealthy, but poorly educated, young in 1930s Britain remain 'substantially without a sense of the past' (Hoggart 1958: 190). If some youth groups 'still sing some of the songs their grandparents sang' (Hoggart 1958: 158), this is only due to their being directly taught them; not due to their having sought to learn of them. It is behind this backdrop that Hoggart outlines his theory of cultural classlessness. The working classes – along with more affluent groups – are 'becoming culturally classless' because mass media such as popular songs 'cannot reach an audience of the size they need by cutting across class boundaries' (Hoggart 1958: 342). Mass media are quite literally *broad*casted. For instance, mass-produced songs cause 'weak communalism' (Hoggart

1958: 228) and threaten working-class traditions. Hoggart suggests that while older forms of communal singing were 'both personal and public', in newer forms such as crooning 'there is a huge, public effect . . . The singer is reaching millions but pretends that he is reaching only "you"' (Hoggart 1958: 227). The uses of literacy are being wasted on these sentimental, phoney, 'candy floss' forms of mass entertainment. More recently, Hoggart (2004) has continued this theme of mass media contributing to a mass, culturally deprived society without a true sense of identity and belonging. In another work, he outlines his solution: 'Broadcasting will be on a local scale; it will be something people take part in, not something that they are simply given' (Hoggart 1972: 88). Hoggart's remedy is a retreat from advanced modernity back to a nostalgic age of class traditions – a blend of cultural pessimism and conservatism where elders hold sway over peer-group and media influences, akin to Riesman's theory of inner-directedness.

Williams: technology and cultural form

Medium theory is criticized most often for its **technological determinism**. Raymond Williams – particularly in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (first published in 1974) – has been one of the most ardent critics of this concept, which he defines as follows:

> The basic assumption of technological determinism is that a new technology – a printing press or a communications satellite – 'emerges' from technical study and experiment. It then changes the society or the sector into which it has 'emerged'. 'We' adapt to it, because it is the new modern way.
>
> (Williams 1983b: 129)

The deterministic approach states that technologies have an autonomous power to 'create new societies or new human conditions' (Williams 2003: 6) notwithstanding the fact that they are invented, produced and used by human beings. In the case of medium theory, McLuhan insists that the introduction of any new medium will shape how people live their lives. Williams argues against such an idea by showing how 'a technical invention as such has comparatively little social significance' until it has been adapted to existing social and economic conditions (Williams 1983b: 129–30). For instance, the printing press may have been invented in the fifteenth century but 'The rise in reading, and in quality, was in fact steady' (Williams 1965: 181) and it was not until over three hundred years after the Gutenberg invention that literacy had become widespread enough in Britain to identify a middle-class reading public. Working-class literacy, by contrast, was only

achieved much later as a foremost consequence of social and political processes – namely, the 1870 Education Act that introduced compulsory schooling – as opposed to technological ones.

Unlike McLuhan's account which he attacks as 'wholly unhistorical and asocial' (Williams 2003: 131), Williams draws on a series of historical examples of inventions in media communications to show how each technology was always foreseen for a previously devised purpose before it was discovered. Moreover, the effects of each media technology were anticipated before that technology came into use: 'In no way is this a history of communications systems creating a new society or new social conditions' (Williams 2003: 12). Rather than focus on the *causes* of technologies – as does McLuhan – Williams addresses what *causes them*. In the main, technologies of all kinds, and not just media ones, develop for commercial, political and military purposes. In the case of railways and telegraphy (the predecessor of telephony), both developed in the USA and Britain for commercial reasons, to drive industrial development by enabling the efficient transportation of raw materials to factories and distributing the finished products across nations. These two technologies combined to ignite what the renowned social historian Asa Briggs calls a communications revolution: 'Railways and telegraphs ... were directly related to each other. There was, indeed, a continuing link between physical and electrical communication' (Briggs 1966: 8). McLuhan also mentions the role of railways in industrialization, but is surely wrong to argue that these technologies created new societies 'quite independent of the freight or content of the railway medium' (McLuhan 1964: 8). The railway medium, on the contrary, contained a message such as 'coal' that fuelled the fires to create steel, textiles and other essential materials for the Industrial Revolution.

At first it might seem strange to compare the railway medium with those technologies more familiarly referred to as 'media' today, such as television. Williams, however, attempts to make these comparisons by showing how the history of communications follows the same pattern in different societies: business and transport communications develop first, caused mostly by economic demands, and then there emerge forms of information and entertainment communications, caused mostly by social and cultural demands. So television was slow to develop in comparison with, say, the telephone, because it did not initially demonstrate obvious economic benefits. In contrast to medium theory, then, technologies are shown by Williams to develop as an outcome of human needs and intentions. Technologies do not emerge from the isolation of a laboratory and then determine the needs that humans require. Television, argues Williams, was invented due to social demand – as well as political and economic demands – and the use to which it was put was *intended* before the first television sets were sold.

Like the radio, Williams suggests that demand for television resulted

from a social tendency which he terms 'mobile privatization'. This concept refers to 'an at-once mobile and home-centred way of living' (Williams 2003: 19) that became commonly experienced in late industrial societies during the first half of the twentieth century. People are increasingly living as 'private small-family units' or as 'self-enclosed individuals' but at the same time 'there is a quite unprecedented mobility of such restricted privacies' (Williams 1983b: 188). For instance, the family home becomes increasingly privatized and self-sufficient as people's working and living conditions – and wages – improve, but this privacy and self-sufficiency are dependent on external factors such as job opportunities and social welfare. From this state of affairs results 'the need and form of a new kind of "communication": news from "outside", from otherwise inaccessible sources' (Williams 2003: 20–1). It was this need for a continuous 'flow' of communication that television fulfilled. Another example of mobile privatization is car traffic. From the outside, 'traffic flows and their regulation are clearly a social order of a determined kind' in which technology appears to determine and dehumanize our lives, but this is 'not at all how it feels inside the [car] shell, with people you want to be with, going where you want to go' within the privatized, 'conditioned atmosphere and internal music of this windowed shell' (Williams 1983b: 188–9). Williams's theory of mobile privatization is simultaneously about regulation and self-determination; containment and freedom; technology and cultural form. As such, mobile privatization is able to overcome 'the unholy alliance' (Williams 1983b: 143) in the great debate about modernity – on the one hand, medium theory and its flawed technological determinism; and on the other hand, the Leavisite tradition of modernist criticism and its cultural pessimism with respect to the 'levelling down' effects of mass communications technologies.

Habermas: media and the public sphere

How have media changed the character of public opinion through the course of modernity? This is the question addressed by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (first published in 1962). Habermas argues that a bourgeois (middle-class) **public sphere** of intellectuals that helped to supplant medieval aristocracies and served an important political function in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in countries such as Britain, France and Germany has become obsolete during the phase of late modernity or advanced capitalism. No longer is it possible for a public sphere made up of private citizens to engage in critical debate likely to have repercussions for contemporary politics, art, and so on. However, in the coffee houses and social clubs of eighteenth-century London and Paris – among other centres of power and struggle – such critical debate and its

political consequences were wide-ranging. This bourgeois public sphere of academics, shopkeepers and others collectively generated ideas and policies in critical dialogue with aristocratic counterparts – often circulated through self-produced periodicals, sometimes known as 'moral weeklies' – that effectively steered the course of politics, art, science and morality in the world outside and beyond. Institutions of the public sphere, such as coffee houses and clubs, had three criteria in common: all participants were treated as equals and status was disregarded; debate was focused on issues rarely questioned by the powerful nobility; and 'everyone had to *be able* to participate' (Habermas 1989: 37) in this inclusive arena of discussion. Unfortunately according to Habermas, from the 1830s onwards, the political influence of the bourgeois public sphere weakened as a result of its small-circulation periodicals suffering direct competition from the large-circulation commercial press.

The decline of the bourgeois public sphere was partly due to the rise of mass media along with wider trends in the concentration of economic capital. Newspaper presses merged and bought out one another, combining their economic and technological prowess to reinforce and strengthen their market share. In nineteenth-century Britain this resulted in rapid concentration of media power (see Curran and Seaton 2003). Trends in the media industry were not peculiar to wider trends in different sectors – textiles, steel, food, financial and other sectors all experienced takeovers and mergers that concentrated capital in the hands of a few wealthy industrialists. For Habermas, this advanced capitalist phase of modernity effectively transformed the public sphere from a culture-debating to a culture-consuming one. As the author notes, 'rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception' (Habermas 1989: 161). Television, radio and other mass media – as the Lynds observed – separated the private from the public sphere by detrimentally affecting participation in organized forms of leisure and social (including political) activities. Political debate still receives airtime across today's media but such debate has lost its critical edge and no longer speaks to public concerns because the umbilical cord that formerly connected private individuals to the public sphere has been severed. As such, 'The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only' (Habermas 1989: 171) and far removed from the golden age of a culture-debating public sphere. Today's mediated political debates function as 'a tranquillizing substitute for action' (Habermas 1989: 264) in which participants carefully hone their self-presentations so as to manage public opinion about their political positions.

For Habermas, two main factors that have diluted the public sphere and dragged it into the 'levelling-down' pit of the mass media are advertising and public relations. Figure 3.5 outlines how Habermas distinguishes between three phases of news print production that developed chronologically in

Type of news medium	Emphasis in content	Main gatekeeper/ influence
1. Information pamphlet (e.g. newsletter)	Factual news	Non-specific
2. Critical journal/periodical (e.g. moral weekly)	Editorial comment/literary and political dialogue	Editor/writers (the bourgeois public sphere)
3. Consumer title (e.g. popular newspaper)	Advertising/public relations	Publisher/owners

Figure 3.5 Habermas's history of news print production

European countries, although these phases did not apply to the development of news print media in the United States, which from the outset was an advertising-driven, commercial enterprise.

The popular, consumer-oriented press was 'released from the pressure to take sides ideologically' (Habermas 1989: 184) by the all-important profit motive, although Habermas points out that such a profit motive itself amounted to the declaration of a political stance that pandered to existing commercial interests and stood in opposition to the 'hard talk' of the critical bourgeois press. Consumer titles enjoyed substantial profits through advertising revenue and effectively allowed the public sphere – once an important arena of debate between private individuals and the nobility – to be invaded by privileged individuals (such as advertisers) with privileged private interests to publicize.

The public sphere as a platform for advertising also became, a little later, a platform for public relations and what Habermas refers to as the psychological techniques of opinion management. Public relations, like advertising, aims to achieve publicity – and subsequent profit through sales or public support – for particular private interests. However, public relations is more effective than advertising because it disguises itself as editorial penned by the ostensible integrity of 'learned' journalists:

> The sender of the message hides his business intentions in the role of someone interested in the public welfare. The influencing of consumers borrows its connotations from the classic idea of a public of private people putting their reason to use and exploits its legitimations for its own ends. The accepted functions of the public sphere are integrated into the competition of organized private interests.
>
> (Habermas 1989: 193)

The bourgeois public sphere – 'a public of private people putting their reason to use' – is therefore cynically reconstructed for the benefit of private

commercial interests. Public relations is a process of legitimating such interests for the public good. Like Riesman's notion of other-directedness, Habermas considers modern-day consumers to be hoodwinked into 'constant consumption training' (Habermas 1989: 192) that shapes public opinion into a soft exchange of views – about the latest washing-up liquid, or the new-release video game, or the next generation of mobile phones – instead of hard, serious discussion about the politics and policies of the day. Moreover, media-inflected public relations and advertising are leading to a 'refeudalization of the public sphere' (Habermas 1989: 195) because governments follow the example of private enterprises by addressing their citizens as consumers. These consumers suffer from 'the false consciousness that as critically reflecting people they contribute responsibly to public opinion' (Habermas 1989: 194) when in fact they are merely puppets being pulled by the strings of businesspeople and politicians. It is these powerful individuals with privileged access to the mediated public sphere of contemporary developed societies who represent a modern-day aristocracy (media barons no less) bestowed with great public authority like the feudal lords of medieval times.

Habermas's theory of the public sphere has been questioned by critics, especially in the way it romanticizes a golden age of bourgeois intellectuals before the advent of mass media and culture. Four criticisms cited by one critic are that Habermas equates the bourgeois public sphere with popular opinion, which is unconvincing in relation to historical evidence; that he assumes the public sphere granted access to all, when, in fact, eighteenth-century bourgeois society excluded a majority of poor and ill-educated people as well as women; that he has a simplistic view on contemporary media consumers as manipulated individuals; and that his model for more democratic public affairs in modern, diverse societies is vague and unworkable (Thompson 1995b). It could be argued that Habermas also fails to appreciate the wide-scale distribution or reproducibility (in Benjamin's terms) of moral and political debate across modern-day press and television – a far cry from the relatively inaccessible bourgeois public sphere.

Nonetheless, Habermas has identified a problem in how mass media represent – or rather, misrepresent – public opinion and public interests which can be traced back to an earlier period in our contemporary history. A team of sociologists and anthropologists in Britain, known as Mass-Observation, echoed Habermas's views on the refeudalization of the public sphere back in the late 1930s. They argued that 'People want inside information, they want to get behind the news' and that 'a growing number of people want less stories and more facts' about social life (Madge and Harrisson 1939: 7 and 10):

> The present position of the Intellectual Few is a relic of the times when the mass of the population consisted of serfs who could neither

> read nor write. Then a few people at the top could easily impose their beliefs and rule on the multitude ... in many ways there is as much intellectual serfdom as ever.
>
> (Madge and Harrisson 1939: 11)

Mass-Observation compared fact and 'objective reality' – which they tried to capture using social survey and observational methods – with the mass media and party politics, both of which were elitist institutions out of touch with the concerns of everyday people. In contrast to these elitist institutions, 'Mass-Observation shares the interests of most people in the actual, in what happens from day to day' (Madge and Harrisson 1937: 30). The reports and directive replies that were compiled and published by Mass-Observation aimed to represent an alternative public sphere whose voice could not be heard by a hostile, media-driven sphere of phoney public relations and propaganda. Elsewhere, Habermas (1985) has argued that the 'project of modernity' has so far failed because its social and cultural force has only been realized in one aspect: that is, its aesthetic form (modern art). Modern science and morality remain incomplete forms precisely because the public arena in which to debate and evaluate them is yet to be retrieved.

Summary

This chapter has considered:

- What modernity means, its social and historical context, and its relationship to modernism.
- Medium theory (Innis, McLuhan) and its revolutionary claims about the influence of media and communications technologies on social life.
- The reproducibility of mechanical technologies such as film (Benjamin) and their political function in modern societies.
- Modernist criticism of mass culture, also known as cultural pessimism (e.g. the Leavises).
- Theories of mass literacy (Riesman, Hoggart) that point to the unhealthy influence of mass media and modernity.
- Critiques of medium theory that emphasize the social, economic and political factors that determine technological use – and reject the idea of technological determinism (Williams).
- The decline of a culture-debating public sphere and its replacement by a culture-consuming, mass-mediated public sphere in late modernity (Habermas).

Further reading

Curran, J. and Seaton, J. (2003) *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*, 6th edn. London: Routledge.

Now in its sixth edition, this comprehensive overview of British media history is a tried-and-tested resource for all students interested in the relationship between media and processes of modernity such as industrialization and public regulation.

Garnham, N. (2000) *Emancipation, the Media and Modernity: Arguments About the Media and Social Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A polemical account of the relationship between media, modernity and Enlightenment thought. Chapters on media histories, media as technologies, and media and politics. Recommended for advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.

Levinson, P. (1999) *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium*. London: Routledge.

This book discusses McLuhan's ideas about media and their impact on our lives, as well as the author's updating of these ideas to shed light on our present-day digital age. Recommended for advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.

Morley, D. (2007) *Media, Modernity and Technology: The Geography of the New*. Abingdon: Routledge.

A diverse selection of essays from Morley on geographical and anthropological approaches to media technologies in modern life, including a fascinating approach to television as a visible object rather than a medium. Accessible to all media students, although some essays are better suited to advanced undergraduates and postgraduates.

4 Structuralism and semiotics

Introduction

This chapter focuses on structuralist theories of media and the method of **semiotics** that emerged from theoretical themes which underpin **structuralism**. The work of a linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, will begin our discussion. Central to Saussure's theory of language is the distinction between synchronic and diachronic forms of analysis. Synchronic analysis explores language as a system at a given moment in time. It is a 'snapshot' form of analysis. Diachronic analysis, on the other hand, explores a language system as it evolves over a period of time. Etymology is a type of diachronic analysis. By contrast:

> Structuralism as a whole is necessarily synchronic; it is concerned to study particular systems or structures under artificial and ahistorical conditions, neglecting the systems or structures out of which they have emerged in the hope of explaining their present functioning.
>
> (Sturrock 1979: 9)

Unlike theories of modernity, structuralism is oblivious to history in its search for what language means and represents here and now. Semiotics is the method that serves this purpose. Semiotics analyses language as a whole system that structures its individual parts into distinct units of meaning. These units of meaning are referred to as signs. Since the system is constantly changing – new signs emerge, old signs become obsolete – what semiotics does is freeze the moment in order to analyse the system at work. Structuralism is the theoretical framework that seeks to understand how systems work to structure their individual parts at any given moment in time.

Language is the system *par excellence*, but inextricably linked to language are social, cultural, political and economic systems. Societies, like languages, structure their individual parts (i.e. citizens) precisely through processes of differentiation. Our social lives are structured by powerful agents of the social system such as governments. Media institutions are also powerful agents of the social system, but at the same time these agents are structured by the system too. As we will discuss in relation to structuralist theories of myth, ideology and hegemony, it is possible to theorize media texts (especially news) and the institutions that produce them as meaning-makers. The ways in which we perceive our social and cultural lives are shaped to a great extent

by what we see on television or read in newspapers or hear on the radio. Media – among other meaning systems – structure our lives. Of course, we do not simply accept what we see on television or read in the newspapers or hear on the radio. As Hall (1980) notes, we 'decode' media texts in different ways – sometimes we agree, sometimes we disagree. Nonetheless, the power to decide what stories, ideas, tastes and values are offered to us via media communications is structured unequally in favour of some interests (the ruling ones) rather than others (the interests of the silent majority). Hebdige's subcultural theory reminds us that ideological and hegemonic power can be met with resistance, but for Foucault resistance is banal because we have internalized the power structures that oppress us.

Saussure and Barthes: language and myth

Before we can begin to understand structuralist theories of media, it is first necessary to probe in greater depth the theory of **language** outlined by Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (first published in 1916). Saussure dismissed the notion that language simply reflects reality and instead suggested that language operates within its own system. This system *constructs* meanings within a language – meanings do not evolve in any natural or unique way. He called this approach semiology, which means the study of signs, but we will use the more common term for this approach, known as semiotics. A sign (word) such as 'rat', for instance, has two properties: a sound and an idea. But there is no connection between the sound and the idea: 'the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary' (Saussure 1966: 113). Even a sign like 'sizzle' – which some would cite as an example of onomatopoeia – has no meaning in relation to its sound, according to Saussure's theory of language. Working as a system, the signs (i.e. words) that form a language are able to signify ideas precisely because they are different from other signs: 'Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others' (Saussure 1966: 114). So language is structured through difference, and different ideas depend on different sounds, or 'the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others, for differences carry signification' (Saussure 1966: 118).

For example, we can only understand the word 'rat' as a unit of meaning in the English language because its sound – as well as the idea or thing it signifies – differs from that of other words, such as 'mouse' or 'cat'. If 'rat' was the word used to signify all of these 'real' things (i.e. mouse and cat as well as rat), its meaning would be imprecise and the whole system of language would have effectively failed to signify. However, in Latin there is only one term – 'mus' – to refer to both a rat and a mouse. Latin speakers, historically, have

not distinguished between the two creatures because they are 'indifferent' to Latin cultures. Likewise, Eskimos have several different words to describe 'snow' whereas English speakers only use one. As Umberto Eco rightly demonstrates in support of Saussure, 'any cultural phenomenon is *also* a sign phenomenon' (Eco 1973: 61). Cultural meanings are therefore specific to language systems that operate within the rules of semiotics.

Saussure shows, therefore, that any single sign (or word) in a language system is inextricably linked with the system as a whole. A word's 'content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists around it' (Saussure 1966: 115). In order to illustrate this, he makes a distinction between the *langue* (the whole system or structure) and the *parole* (specific utterances within this system) of a given language. An utterance (*parole*) can only signify meaning effectively in its relation to the whole system of a language (*langue*). The analogy to a game of chess is a good one:

> Each individual move in chess is selected from the whole system of possible chess moves. So we could call the system of possible chess moves the *langue* of chess. Any individual move in a game of chess would be *parole*, the selection of a move from the whole set of possible moves in the *langue* of chess.
>
> (Bignell 2002: 8)

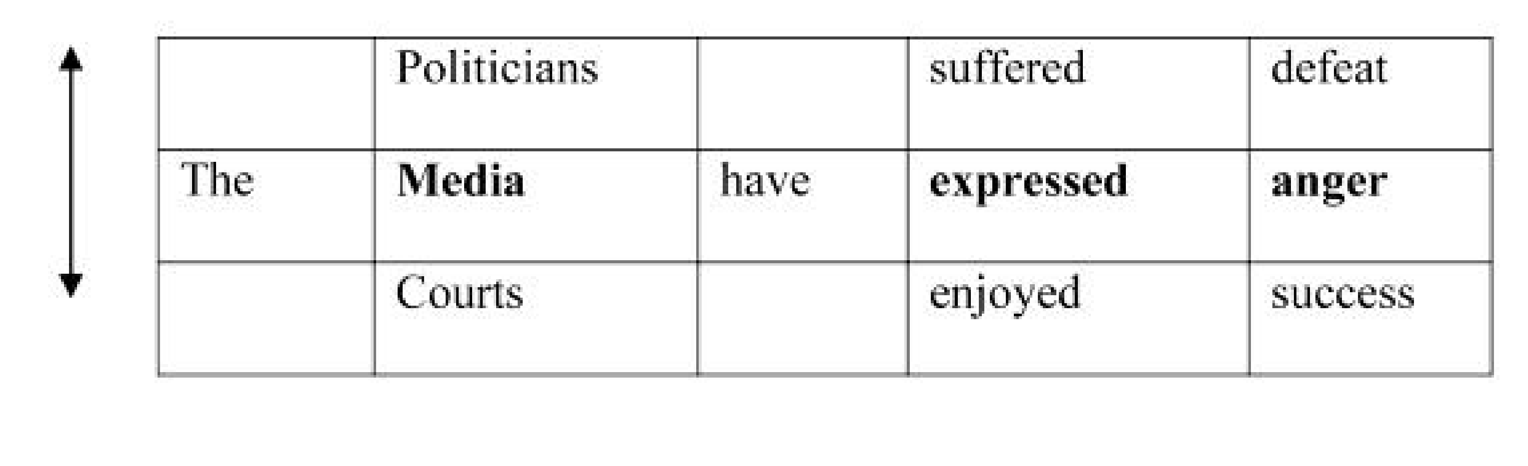
This distinction between *langue* and *parole* can be applied not only to the formal properties of a language (linguistics) but also to uses of language in social contexts. As Figure 4.1 shows, language usage is structured by a system that works along two axes: the *syntagmatic* (meanings which exist at a specific moment in time) and the *paradigmatic* (meanings which could be used to substitute existing ones). The examples in Figure 4.1 prove Saussure's point that changes in the paradigmatic features of a language system alter the whole structure of meaning as carried by the syntagmatic features, and vice versa.

Following Saussure, Roland Barthes's theory of **myth** is indebted to his predecessor's claim that a word's idea (its signified element) and its sound (its signifier element) are unconnected but together make up the total meaning of that word (its sign), which can only be understood in relation to all other signs – as in the relationship between *langue* and *parole*. However, Barthes extends Saussure's theory of language systems by applying it to the systems by which societies and cultures develop 'myths'. Societies and cultures, like languages, are considered to be structured by a 'whole' system that determines their individual parts. Of course, language as a system is also fundamental to how societies or cultures persist. But Barthes suggests that purely linguistic meanings are radically changed by social and cultural practices.

Barthes's most important work in this respect is *Mythologies* (first

PARADIGMATIC DIMENSION

(vertical substitutions of meaning)



	Politicians		suffered	defeat
The	**Media**	have	**expressed**	**anger**
	Courts		enjoyed	success

SYNTAGMATIC DIMENSION (horizontal substitutions of meaning)

Figure 4.1 Syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions of semiotics

published in 1957). Here he develops Saussure's notion that meanings do not simply refer to real things. Furthermore, meanings can develop beyond their linguistic properties and take on the status of myths. Saussure suggested that the meaning of any term in a language system consists of a signifier plus a signified to give a sign (Figure 4.2).

SIGNIFIER (sound/phonetic quality) + SIGNIFIED (idea) = SIGN (total meaning)

Figure 4.2 Saussure's semiotic theory of language

Barthes, on the other hand, introduces an extra dimension to this equation (Figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3 Barthes's semiotic theory of language and myth

Source: Barthes (1993: 115)

Language – the first order of signification in Barthes's model – is therefore capable of generating a second order of signification called myth. This is the basis for Barthes's approach to semiotics. In Figure 4.3 we can see how a sign (i.e. an idea plus a sound) such as 'rat', which operates in a first order of signification, becomes a signifier within a second-order 'myth' system of signification. In the case of rat, therefore, its sign in the 'language' order of

signification defines it as, say, 'a small rodent with a pointed snout'. However, its sign in the 'myth' order of signification would be extended to what rat means in particular social and cultural contexts. In English-speaking, Western countries such as Britain, rat as a myth signifies dirt, disease, the darkness of underground sewers and cellars. Most of the mythical meanings that we attach to 'rat' are negative, because most of us dislike or even fear the 'real' creature which the word signifies. The distinction between language and myth is sometimes equated to the distinction between denotation and connotation. Denotation is similar to a dictionary definition of a sign; connotation, by contrast, refers to the wider social and cultural meanings (myths) attached to a sign. Rat denotes rodent; it connotes much, much more (dirt, disease, and so on).

How does Barthes's semiotic – or structuralist – theory of myth apply to media? If we consider media to be an important – perhaps *the* most important – element within a social and cultural system of signs that are capable of generating myths, then clearly television, the internet and other mass communications can help to nurture some myths and not others. Barthes's best-known example of myth-making derives from a medium. He analyses the front cover of an issue of *Paris-Match*, a French magazine, which depicts a black boy in military outfit looking upwards and saluting what is assumed to be the French flag. Barthes reads this image (i.e. sign) as language and myth. On the level of language, the image denotes a black boy giving a French salute. Far more can be read into what this image *connotes* though. As a myth, Barthes suggests that the image signifies 'that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag' (Barthes 1993: 116). The image of the proud black soldier connotes a myth that France is a multicultural land of opportunity far from an oppressive colonizer of foreign peoples. Clearly, the meanings signified by this image as language and myth are only *made* possible in how they compare with the vast range of other meanings that an image like this might depict if it was configured differently. If the boy in the image is white and not black, the image's meaning is radically changed.

Barthes applies his theory of myth to several 'mythologies' associated with his native French culture, such as wine and Citroen cars. We can apply his theory to contemporary media mythologies, although we would need to stretch our imagination and thought processes in the same way that Barthes did. For instance, BBC News 24 occasionally broadcasts a pre-recorded trailer just before headlines appear 'on the hour'. In the order of a language system, the moving images shown denote foreign correspondents 'on location' in various parts of the world, reporting on different kinds of news stories (environmental, political, financial, and so on). A timer counts down the seconds from 30 to 0 in anticipation of the headlines that will immediately follow once the trailer has finished. But we can read this sequence of images

on the more sophisticated order of a myth system. From this reading we can appreciate how the BBC News 24 channel – and its journalists – takes on connotations of a professional organization dedicated to fast, concise, global news coverage. BBC foreign correspondents are eyewitnesses to international affairs in a not dissimilar way that Britain has its metaphorical eyes on the world. We seek out evil, we search out poverty and disease – 'we' the BBC, like the country we represent, are a force for good, and a picture of fine health compared to the tyranny and misfortune of others. The timer, moreover, connotes punctuality and recency (i.e. BBC news values). News does not occur on the hour – in reality, it can occur at any time – but news is always made fresh by headlines 'on the hour' to reinforce the myth that news is always 'new'. A timer that began counting down the seconds from 30 *minutes* to zero, rather than 30 seconds, would generate very different meanings (and myths) about BBC News 24. Instead of pandering to breaking news or the headline stories, we might read this news channel as dedicated to programming that deals with in-depth debate and dialogue.

The need to 'stretch one's imagination' when identifying media mythologies points to a weakness with semiotics as a method and the structuralist theory it informs. Far from a science, semiotics is a highly subjective method of reading social and cultural myths that depends entirely on 'the analytical brilliance of the semiotician' (Couldry 2000a: 75). Moreover, as well as being unable to account for historical changes in language and myth, given its focus on synchronicity, semiotics is only able to analyse one particular text in isolation. What Nick Couldry calls the 'total textual environment' (Couldry 2000a: 73) – the multitude of media texts and technologies that we interact with on a daily basis – cannot be penetrated by semiotic analysis. Moreover, semiotics as a method of textual analysis is easily abused to make claims about how media texts signify meanings in everyday use. Angela McRobbie acknowledges that while semiotics can 'read' ideologies in media texts, it cannot account for the views of readers/audiences and therefore cannot 'understand the complex and contested social processes which accompany the construction of new images [and texts]' (McRobbie 1994: 165). Similarly in relation to semiotic analysis of music texts, Tia DeNora rightly interprets 'an epistemologically naïve move' in 'a tacit shift in many semiotic "readings" of music . . . from description of musical material and its social allocation to the theorization of that material's "wider" significance and cultural impact' (DeNora 2000: 28). Semiotics, given that it can only ever be one person's interpretation of what they read, hear or see, is certainly not a substitute for empirical audience research.

Hall: Encoding/Decoding, ideology and hegemony

While he does not theorize **ideology** in any great depth, Barthes is nonetheless clear that myths contain ideological meanings. Myth and ideology in their structuralist senses are synonymous. For Barthes, the ideology of French colonialism is expounded in the proud salute of the black soldier. It is only by deconstructing a myth, or reading a myth's hidden meanings, that its ideology – the values and beliefs it upholds – can be exposed. The concept of 'ideology' has been theorized to a greater extent by structuralist Marxists who followed Barthes, such as Louis Althusser and Stuart Hall. Althusser (1971) argued that individuals in capitalist societies are governed by ideological state apparatuses (ISAs), including schools, legal systems, religious institutions, media communications, and so on. These ISAs espouse the ideologies of powerful political institutions, such as governments and armies, in implicit – not explicit – ways, and sometimes without knowing it. As such, individuals 'internalize' ruling capitalist ideologies, unaware that their lives are repressed by the very institutions that represent and serve them (and perhaps even employ them). As Hall notes, Althusser's approach was more sophisticated than the classical Marxist notion of top-down 'false consciousness' which suggests that ideology is imposed 'from above' by elite powers upon the unknowing masses (see discussion of Adorno in Chapter 7, for a version of classical Marxism). ISAs point to a 'more linguistic or "discursive" conception of ideology' (Hall 1996a: 30) that is reproduced by various institutional practices and structures. Ellis Cashmore (1994) applies Althusser's theory of ISAs to television by suggesting that viewers are given a partial view of the world that fits with state interests, even when television is not explicitly state-controlled.

Although Althusser's ideas can be applied to media, the ideas of Hall rework structuralist theories of ideology into a more systematic theory of media in their social and cultural functions. Hall also criticizes Althusser for assuming that ideology, although internalized, always functions to reproduce state capitalist values: 'how does one account for subversive ideas or for ideological struggle?' (Hall 1996a: 30). As such, Hall defines ideology in a discursive sense as 'ideas, meanings, conceptions, theories, beliefs, etc. and the form of consciousness which are appropriate to them' (Hall 1977: 320). Hall, along with other theorists associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) such as Dick Hebdige and David Morley, investigated the relationship between media and ideology through semiotic analysis of systems of signification in texts such as television news bulletins.

Hall's aim is to rediscover ideology as a concept that can reveal the 'politics of signification' engaged in by media institutions. His starting point

is to attack behaviourist theories of media. Models of 'effects' such as Lasswell's formula theorize the communication process in terms of its reliability (see Chapter 2). If messages are not received as intended, this is deemed to be a failure of communication in a technical or behavioural sense. According to 'effects' perspectives, messages are not received correctly if the channels of communication from sender to recipient are distorted by electrical or human error. The meanings of messages themselves, however, are assumed to be distortion-free and universally transferable. But Hall argues that behaviourist models are flawed because they fail to situate media communications within existing social, economic and political structures. The meanings of messages, then, are able to be distorted and interpreted differently than intended according to the positions of producers (senders) and audiences (recipients) within these existing structures:

> Meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has to be *made to mean*. Language and symbolization is the means by which meaning is produced. This approach dethroned the referential notion of language, which had sustained previous content analysis, where the meaning of a particular term or sentence could be validated simply by looking at what, in the real world, it referenced.
>
> (Hall 1982: 67)

Content analysis – a favoured method of cultivation theory (see Chapter 2) – is rendered meaningless by this structuralist perspective on meaning as social production. Like Saussure and Barthes, Hall states that meaning is a discursive process that operates within a language system (what he terms 'a set of codes') loaded with ideological signification.

Media institutions and the texts they generate are important ideological dimensions through which we make sense of the world. Hall deploys semiotics to understand the sense-making process by which media transmit messages to their audiences. Language is *encoded* (made to mean something) by those with 'the means of meaning production' (i.e. producers) and is then *decoded* (made to mean something) by audiences (Hall 1982: 68). Hall extends this semiotic theory of meaning construction to a model of media production and reception which is commonly known as the Encoding/Decoding model (see Figure 4.4). Unlike the behaviourist approach to communication, Hall's Encoding/Decoding approach does not assume a direct correspondence between the meaning intended by a sender and how that meaning is interpreted by a recipient: 'The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical' (Hall 1980: 131). Hall is interested in how media represent – and misrepresent – what they mean rather than simply reflect those meanings on to their audiences. While encoding and decoding are separate processes, they are not arbitrary however. Encoding – at the phase of

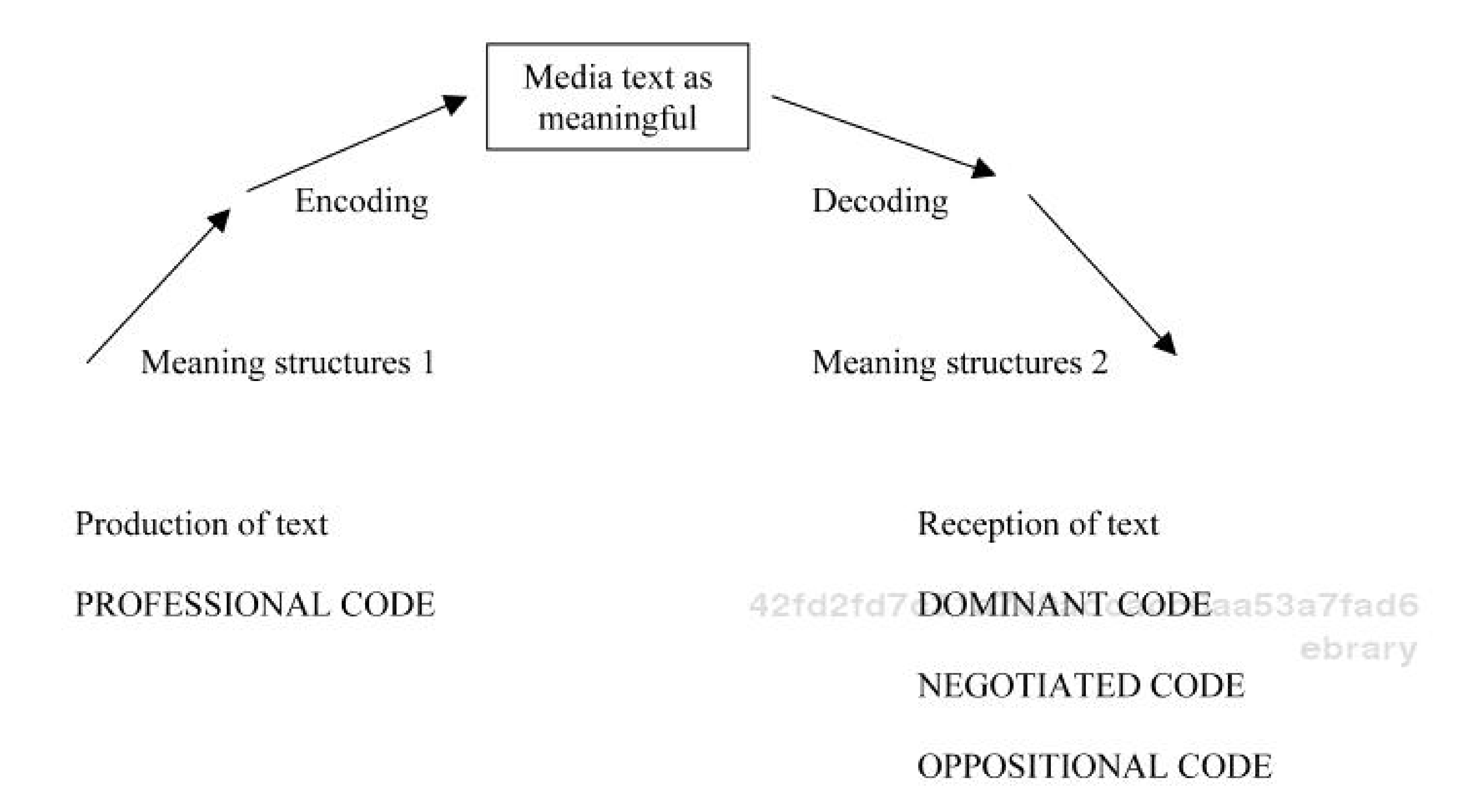


Figure 4.4 The Encoding/Decoding model

Source: Adapted from Hall (1980: 130)

production – operates within a set of *professional codes* such as technical competence and high-budget production values. These professional codes generate preferred meanings that 'have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized' (Hall 1980: 134). Television is the medium that Hall is most interested in. In Britain, for example, the BBC operates a professional code in line with their public service ethos. One characteristic of this code relates to political impartiality – the BBC is not allowed to take sides in party politics, otherwise it would be breaking its code and being unprofessional. The preferred meanings encoded by BBC news channels, therefore, include political impartiality. The assumption is that audiences will not decode partial political points of view if – as seems likely – they adopt the BBC's preferred meanings in their news broadcasts.

While Hall argues that preferred meanings have considerable weight in determining how messages are decoded, they are not *determinate*. This returns us to a basic – but crucial – theory of structuralism that informs the Encoding/Decoding model: 'In a "determinate" moment the structure employs a code and yields a "message"; at another determinate moment the "message", via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices' (Hall 1980: 130). It is precisely because encoding and decoding are distinct, determinate moments that explains why the meaning structures of media messages do not reflect reality in an objective sense. Rather, in the case of television, messages 'can

only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse' (Hall 1980: 129). A news event such as a state funeral, for instance, cannot represent the experience of actually being in attendance at the funeral – it can only signify what the experience is 'really' like through the meaning structures (rules and conventions) of the televisual message. Media – like language systems – are therefore structured through a set of rules, codes and values that make them highly prone to ideological constructions of meaning, or what Barthes refers to as myths. Television is a primary myth-maker – constructer of ideology – according to Hall. Processes of editing, selection, camera operation and arrangement are all important aspects of encoding, in the sense of determining preferred meanings (Hall 1975). BBC news bulletins – like those of all news institutions – are loaded with the ideology of professionalism. What news stories are selected, how each of them are edited, and how they are arranged in a particular order (of importance) are just some of the ways in which the ideology of media professionalism is constructed. Ideologies of newsworthiness do not correspond to an objective set of criteria. On the contrary, newsworthiness is highly subjective and differs from institution to institution, and from country to country. Nonetheless, wherever newsworthiness is practised (on the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and so on), it exerts its preferred meanings upon its audience.

Encoded ideologies such as media professionalism and newsworthiness, however, do not determine meaning structures at the reception phase. Hall (1980) identifies three categories of decoding through which audiences make meaning of media messages. First and in keeping with the professional code, an audience member may adopt a *dominant code* which accepts the preferred meanings intended by the encoders (i.e. media producers). A second possibility is that an audience member adopts a *negotiated code* which accepts some preferred meanings of a media production but opposes others. On a general level, the encoded meanings may be understood and endorsed; but on a more specific, local level these meanings and the rules within which they operate may be discarded, as audience members consider their own positions to be exceptions to the general rule. For example, a parent may adopt a negotiated code when decoding a television show about how to care for babies. He may agree that, in general, the best advice is to lay a baby on its back when placing her in a cot, but disagree in the case of his own son who only ever goes to sleep on his front. Third and finally, an audience member may completely disagree with the preferred meanings of media producers (both on a general and local level), in which case they adopt an *oppositional code* and 'decode the message in a *globally* contrary way' (Hall 1980: 137–8). For example, a news story might be encoded with an ideological message about how 'yobbish' youths are becoming more troublesome and anti-social than previous generations of young people. An oppositional code is adopted at the moment of decoding, however, by someone with historical knowledge of how young

people have committed crimes and been stigmatized by societies (including mass media institutions) since time immemorial.

Hall's Encoding/Decoding model is an attempt to rediscover and rescue ideology from its conception as an omnipotent, oppressive force wielded by the ruling classes upon the masses in the classical Marxist tradition of political economy theory (as we will discuss in Chapter 7). However, in a later work (Hall 1996a), he refers to the 'problem of ideology' as a concept. Can it still withstand application in contemporary, democratic societies where media institutions appear free from the power of states and commercial forces? He acknowledges that Marxist theories of ideology tend to overemphasize 'negative and distorted features' of bourgeois capitalist ideas and values (Hall 1996a: 28). Nevertheless, he remains sympathetic to Marx's original formulation of ideology and particularly to the related concept of **hegemony** formulated by Antonio Gramsci. Unlike many Marxist conceptions of ideology (such as that of Adorno), Marx did not suggest that ideology amounts to mass deception but rather to a situation where individuals within capitalist social systems can only gain a limited impression of the consequences of such systems, given ideological constraints imposed by ruling power elites. The best revision of Marx's ideas, argues Hall, is by Gramsci who contends that 'in particular historical situations, ideas "organize human masses, and create the terrain on which men [*sic*] move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc."' (Hall 1996a: 41, quoting Gramsci 1971). Social, economic and political ideas create struggle, and 'ideological struggle is a part of the general social struggle for mastery and leadership – in short, for hegemony' (Hall 1996a: 43).

Gramsci's theory of hegemony marks a fundamental shift from orthodox structuralism to a more discursive form of post-structuralism with which Hall, among others (see also discussion of Foucault in this chapter), has identified. Hegemony, unlike orthodox approaches to myth and ideology, is about a dialogue between those parts of a society with and without the power to signify their values and intentions:

> [H]egemony is understood as accomplished, not without the due measure of legal and legitimate compulsion, but principally by means of winning consent of those classes and groups who were subordinated within it ... This approach could also be used to demonstrate how media institutions could be articulated to the production and reproduction of the dominant ideologies, while at the same time being 'free' of direct compulsion, and 'independent' of any direct attempt by the powerful to nobble them.
>
> (Hall 1982: 85–6)

In other words, hegemony is a 'give and take' form of power. Hegemony works to permit dissenting voices and oppositional politics, but to suppress

the force of dissent and opposition by actively seeking out support from all parts of a society. Media are argued by Hall to encode their products in the interests of dominant hegemonic forces, such as governments: 'The professional code operates *within* the "hegemony" of the dominant code' (Hall 1980: 136). Even if media institutions do not intend to collude with the forces of hegemony that operate in their countries or regions, they are likely to do so unwittingly because hegemony – unlike more orthodox versions of ideology – is a function of existing social structures and practices; not an intention of individuals. Unlike behaviourists such as Katz and Lazarsfeld, who argued that media have no direct effects other than to reflect the consensus opinion among people, Gramsci and Hall would argue that media – in their propensity to serve a hegemonic function for the good of those in power – effectively manufacture consent (see discussion of Herman and Chomsky in Chapter 7 for a political economy approach to hegemony).

Glasgow Media Group: the ideology of news

Structural Marxist theories about the ideological function of media have been tested out using the types of empirical methods associated with media effects research. Perhaps the most substantial and innovative examples of this research were undertaken by the Glasgow Media Group (GMG) in Britain from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. Its findings suggest that Hall's Encoding/Decoding model affords the audience too much scope for alternative decodings of television productions:

> although there are variations in audience 'readings' of media reports, there are pervasive common themes in the meanings conveyed to the public . . . even though people may 'resist' the dominant message of a programme, it may still have the power to convey facts and to influence their ideas, assumptions, and attitudes.
>
> (Eldridge et al. 1997: 160)

John Eldridge et al. have tended to theorize media – television news organizations in particular – as influential shapers of public opinion. Rather than take the 'effects' approach associated with behaviourism, though, the GMG has re-articulated the debate in terms of the power of media to serve the interests of dominant ideologies. Media are ideological in the sense that they present 'a way of seeing and understanding the world which favours some interests over others' (GMG 1982: 3).

Early studies by the GMG (1976; 1980; 1982) centred on television news reports. Extensive textual and image analysis – inspired by Barthes's ideas about denotative and connotative levels of signification – revealed that 'news

is not a neutral product . . . it is a sequence of socially manufactured messages, which carry many of the culturally dominant assumptions of our society' (GMG 1976: 1). The GMG aimed to 'unpack the coding of television news' and 'reveal the structures of the cultural framework which underpins the production of apparently neutral news' (GMG 1976: 1). News presents itself as 'truth' and 'fact' under the guise of impartiality, as Hall argues, but GMG researchers set out to deconstruct what they called its ideology of truth and neutrality. Analysis of news programming was coupled with participant observation of newsroom practices at the two main news broadcasters in Britain, the BBC and ITN (Independent Television News). The ideological functions of television news are laid bare in the case of reports on industrial strikes by trade unions. Analysis revealed that these reports tended to represent bosses as rational, civilized individuals who were often invited to the studio for interviews, while trade union officials and ordinary workers were represented as emotive members of the baying crowd. In its worst forms, such media **representation** can construct a biased perspective in favour of dominant ideological interests (i.e. those of bosses) and 'the laying of blame for society's industrial and economic problems at the door of the workforce' (GMG 1976: 267). While the workforce is never directly criticized by 'neutral' news presenters and journalists, its side of the argument is presented in a less favourable light by being ignored, sensationalized or juxtaposed with negative images of violent confrontation on picket lines – confrontation that it is often provoked by police and other state authorities.

Akin to Hall, the GMG's argument is that the structural qualities of television news productions determine the ways in which they are interpreted as much as the content of specific news stories. News media therefore possess 'the power to tell people the *order* in which to think about events and issues' (GMG 1982: 1). As well as industrial disputes, the GMG's later studies examined media representations of AIDS (Kitzinger 1993; Miller and Williams 1993), child abuse (Eldridge et al. 1997) and the women's peace movement (Eldridge 1995) among other topics. In each case, news reports were deconstructed to reveal an ideological bias in the way media represented certain groups (police, politicians, doctors, and so on) in comparison to others (social workers, gay people, feminists, and so on). While the GMG's research has achieved the status of a long and established tradition in media studies, its theoretical framework has been criticized in at least two respects. First, it could be argued that the ideological force of media is most pervasive and least noticeable in their capacity to be impartial, as suggested by Hall's professional code. This would problematize the GMG's claim about the ideological function of biased news reporting because

> [the] ideological effectivity of the news is greatest in those areas where the operation of the particular signifying conventions which

> constitute the news and seem to secure impartiality … conceal the operation of another, ideologically loaded set of signifying conventions.
>
> (Bennett 1982: 304)

In other words, the ideological bias of news reporting is powerful precisely because it is concealed under a veil of impartiality that not even the most perceptive textual analysis could detect. A second criticism of the GMG has been its lack of sustained audience research to test whether the ideological functions of media representations actually affect viewers' opinions at the point of reception and thereafter. This leaves the GMG open to an elitist fallacy given the underlying assumption – by not analysing audience responses – that media researchers and theorists can *see* what the rest of us cannot.

Williamson: the ideology of ads

Structuralist theories of ideology have also been applied to the meanings of advertisements. As well as selling goods, ads create structures of meaning, and 'in providing us with a structure in which we, and those goods, are interchangeable, they are selling us ourselves' (Williamson 1978: 13). Informed by structural Marxism, Judith Williamson analyses how ads structure the ways we identify with ourselves in relation to the goods they sell to us. She agrees with Althusser's idea that ideology is 'internalized' in individuals through subtle or subliminal techniques on the part of ISAs. The advertising industry, Williamson suggests, is a highly pervasive ISA in advanced capitalist societies. One such function served by the ideology of ads is to mask the reality of stark class differences in such societies – ads assume that we all have equal access to wealth and luxury. Not everyone can afford a Versace dress but ads – and advertisers – take insufficient account of different consumer needs and expenditure. Williamson does not attempt to measure the effects of advertising on people's spending habits. This kind of research – typical of the behaviourist approach – would be worthwhile to some extent but would tell us little about how advertising structures our values, tastes, ideas and expectations. Instead, Williamson's semiotic analysis of visual signs in ads reveals their hidden ideological meanings and intentions, and their ideological power to structure our lives.

How do ads signify their ideology? Williamson's answer to this question forms her main theoretical argument, which is that ads construct ideological meaning 'not on the level of the overt signified but via the signifiers' (Williamson 1978: 24). She states that 'the signifier of the overt meaning in an advertisement has a function of its own, a place in the process of creating

another, less obvious meaning' (Williamson 1978: 19). In other words, beneath the surface images (i.e. signifiers) contained in any ad can be deciphered hidden meanings using the method of semiotics. So ads make their meaning through a play on the meaning of signifiers rather than what is being signified (i.e. the obvious product meaning). Perfume ads are a good example because they cannot give any 'real' meaning or information about the products they are selling. How can smell be signified without a sample of perfume being attached? In the absence of sufficient 'signifieds', then, perfume products are sold as 'unique, distinctive' consumables through less overt 'signifiers' – images that are attached to those products. Perfume becomes associated with a particular style or 'look' rather than – as it ought to be associated – with a particular smell. These signifiers that work their meaning beneath the surface messages of ads are drawn from what Williamson calls a 'referent system', akin to systems of signification that operate on the basis of differentiation (see discussion of Saussure). Referent systems make connections with images that are auxiliary to those of the product being advertised. There are, in fact, only superficial differences between one perfume product and another (even if one is ten times more expensive than another!), but referent systems are sophisticated enough to carve out and manufacture differentiation even so. As such, referent systems constitute the ideological dimension of ads.

Nonetheless, the ideology of ads can only work its ulterior motives – to mask class differences, to present a world of glamour and happiness, and so on – at the moment in which they are received by consumers. Williamson explains that the reason why the ideological meaning buried in an ad is so elusive and invisible to us is because 'we constantly re-create it. It works *through* us, not at us' (Williamson 1978: 41). As consumers, we are lured into accepting the ideology of ads because they afford us an active role in deciphering their hidden meanings. However, this 'activity' afforded to us is a phoney activity that sucks us into an ideological vacuum wherein we are prevented from seeing a real world – outside referent systems – of inequalities and hardship. One way that we re-create and, moreover, appear to embrace the ideology of ads is by falsely decoding them as personal invitations to improve ourselves. Ads appear, through their signifiers, to address us as individuals, but although we might sense that ads are addressed to lots of people – not just you or I – we are still inclined to accept the invitation: 'You have to exchange yourself with the person "spoken to", the spectator the ad creates for itself ... The "you" in ads is always transmitted plural, but we receive it as singular' (Williamson 1978: 50). Ads provide consumers with an activity, but in partaking in this activity – substituting yourself for 'you' – we are internalizing its preferred ideology, which is that you 'yourself' can be like the ideal 'you' represented in the ad. So while 'we can "consciously work" in "producing" a meaning ... we do not produce a genuine "meaning" but

consume a predetermined "solution"' (Williamson 1978: 75). Ads pretend to empower us but only in ways that they would wish us to be empowered.

They wish us to think 'I am empowered enough to convince myself that I am like the woman in that ad with men flocking around her as she sits in that expensive sports car, which I can also afford and am seriously thinking of buying ... if I can arrange another high-cost loan with my bank!' The 'ideal' types in ads, moreover, are stereotypes that conform to dominant ideological representations of what 'success' and 'happiness' look like (see Qualter 1997). The 'people' represented by ads are typically white, affluent, relatively young and physically attractive but these shiny, happy people are hardly a typical cross-section of society.

Morley: the *Nationwide* audience

The work of David Morley, by contrast to Williamson's study of ads and the GMG's research on television news, has sought to apply structuralist theories of ideological meanings in media texts – particularly Hall's Encoding/Decoding model – to empirical research on media audiences. Echoing Hall and Williamson, Morley suggests in *The Nationwide Audience* (first published in 1980) that 'audiences, like the producers of messages, must also undertake a specific kind of "work" in order to read meaningfully what is transmitted' (Morley and Brunsdon 1999: 125). Moreover, media can only reproduce the dominant ideology of powerful institutions by articulating this ideology to audiences at their level of common sense. He states: 'I would want to insist on the active nature of readings and of cultural production. Too often the audience subject is reduced to the status of an automated puppet pulled by the strings of the text' (Morley and Brunsdon 1999: 273). This audience-centred approach to structuralist theory was tested out by the author in a research project that interviewed groups of people about their responses to viewing two episodes of *Nationwide*, a long-running BBC current affairs television programme that was popular in Britain between 1969 and 1984. These groups were selected according to occupational status and their opinions of what they viewed were applied to the three categories of decoding outlined in Hall's Encoding/Decoding model.

Morley's findings are interesting, even though – as he later recognizes (Morley 1992) – the somewhat contrived method of grouping people's presupposed ideological positions on the basis of their occupations alone must question the validity of these findings. What Morley found, however, to some extent met but in other ways contradicted expectations. Those groups who tended to decode the stories and debates presented by *Nationwide* using a dominant code (i.e. the preferred meaning suggested by the programme's representation of these stories and debates) included bank managers – who it

might be expected would accept the ideological consensus worked by the professional code at the encoding stage given their middle-class status – but also working-class apprentices (semi-skilled manual workers) whose subordinate position in existing social and economic structures might suggest that they were more than likely to disagree with dominant or preferred meanings. Moreover, those groups who tended to decode *Nationwide* using a negotiated code (accepting some preferred meanings but opposing others) included trade union officials and university art students, who it might be assumed would be more hostile (i.e. oppositional) to the capitalist-driven, dominant ideologies reinforced by the programme. While some groups decoded *Nationwide* along expected class lines, other groups confounded expectations. Moreover, a group of black further education students did not understand the programme's content, which would suggest the need for a further category of decoding – a rejection code.

Morley's subsequent critique of the Encoding/Decoding model is perhaps more significant than what he found initially by testing it out. He argues that 'in the case of each of the major categories of decoding (dominant, negotiated or oppositional) we can discern different varieties and inflections of what, for purposes of gross comparison only, is termed the same "code"' (Morley 1992: 118). There are three problems with the model that arise from its theoretical foundations in structuralism and semiotics. First, as referred to in the quote above, decoding suggests a single, universal form of audience interpretation of media texts which is surely too simplistic and fails to account for more subtle nuances in how we read the different meanings that a television programme or pop song might *convey to us*. The complexities of audience interpretations are tackled in a later study (see Morley 1986). Second, there is the issue of intentionality or what literary critics would term 'the intentional fallacy'. Morley notes that the Encoding/Decoding framework is too liable to confuse the ideological meanings of texts with the ideological motivations of producers or authors. Texts themselves are often difficult to interpret in terms of their political, economic or ideological bias without implicating producers with the self-same biases. And third, Morley criticizes the notion of preferred meanings that generate 'preferred readings'. Certain media texts, such as party political broadcasts and possibly news bulletins, can be deemed to present a preferred reading that corresponds more or less with that of the dominant ideology of ruling interests – politicians and big business owners, for example. However, it is much harder to identify the preferred reading of a fictional text such as a romantic film or pop song. Morley asks: 'is the preferred reading a property of the text, the analyst or the audience?' (1992: 122).

In order to bridge this institution–text–audience split in the ideological transfer of meaning, Morley suggests an alternative approach: genre theory (Morley 1992: 126–30; see also Morley 1980). Genre theory derives from the work of Stephen Neale who claims that 'genres are not to be seen as forms of

textual codifications, but as systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject' (Neale 1980: 19). So media genres characterized by certain expectations and conventions – horror films, house music, reality TV, and so on – are defined as such by a combination of the institutions that produce them, the texts that constitute them, and the audiences that receive them. Genres ensure that audience expectations and prejudgements about a given media text are generally satisfied by industry production techniques. Genres, unlike the individual texts which make up their parts, are categorized by sets of rules determining how they signify meaning that must be governed by both producers and audiences in order for those genre categories to withstand signification. However, genres are not ideologically neutral in the way they generate this semiotic harmony between producers and audiences. On the contrary, certain genres demand different forms of 'cultural competence' (Morley 1992) that tend to result in one genre becoming associated with a different class of audience in comparison to another. In crude terms, working-class women are more likely to become culturally adept at watching soap operas, while middle-class men locate cultural competence in financial news programming. Morley's discussion of cultural competence in relation to genre theory is not dissimilar to the concept of cultural capital (see discussion of Bourdieu in Chapter 9).

Hebdige: *Subculture*

The most systematic attempt to analyse oppositional forms of decoding in media and cultural texts is Dick Hebdige's subcultural theory. Hebdige deployed semiotics to analyse how texts and products are used in subversive ways by youth subcultures such as punks and mods in order to articulate their resistance to dominant ideologies in society such as education and housing policies. Subcultures operate through a system of oppositional codes that offend the majority, threaten the status quo and contradict the 'myth of consensus' suggested by dominant codes (Hebdige 1979: 18). Like Hall, Hebdige applies hegemony theory to his structuralist approach, but his concern is more with how a dominant hegemony can be challenged and threatened rather than with how it maintains its hold over society. What does he mean by a 'subculture'? Essentially, a subculture is an underground set of practices – usually working-class in character – that try to resist surveillance by the dominant culture (e.g. police) as well as incorporation into mainstream cultures. A subculture ceases to exist when it becomes incorporated, manufactured and packaged by commercial interests. Punks' use of dog collars, bought from pet shops, cease to retain their subcultural value when they can be purchased for twice the price in High Street shops, for example.

According to Hebdige, subcultures resist surveillance and incorporation by creating their own internal logic of identity and cohesion. Two structuralist concepts underpin this claim: theories of homology and *bricolage*. Referring to Willis's (1978) theoretical conception, homology is defined as 'the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses to express or reinforce its focal concerns' (Hebdige 1979: 113). Music is only one media and cultural form, though, in which subcultures reinforce their concerns, fit together their values and experiences. Table 4.1 suggests some others, including the system of language (what Hebdige calls 'argot') adopted by a subculture to reinforce its unity.

Table 4.1 Homologies of youth subcultures

	Teds	*Mods*	*Punks*	*Ravers*
Music	Rock 'n' Roll	Ska/reggae	Heavy rock	Acid house
Clothes	Suits	Smart casual	Homemade	Baggy casual
Objects	Cigars	Scooters	Dog collars	Whistles
Drugs	Tobacco	LSD	Dope	Ecstasy
Argot/slang	'Spiv'	'About town'	'Piss off'	'Buzzin'

Each subculture, therefore, becomes associated with a cultural inventory of signs and symbols that 'fit' with its identities and concerns. This model harps back to Saussure's syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions (see Figure 4.1). Through homologies, therefore, subcultures develop exclusive, sophisticated systems of signification that protect them from censure or exploitation by outsiders. However, we can see that any single change in the syntagmatic features of a subculture would affect the whole paradigmatic fit of meanings and therefore break down its homological unity. As soon as the scooter becomes a mass-produced fashion object not solely used by the mod subculture, the whole homological unity of mods is fractured.

Related to homology is the concept of *bricolage* (first used by Claude Lévi-Strauss, a well-known structural anthropologist) and its sister term, appropriation. *Bricolage* and appropriation refer to the way in which symbolic objects are invested with subcultural meanings that are borrowed from different contexts and oppose their original functions. Dog collars had their original meaning – that is, as a pet-restraining device – opposed and appropriated by punks to fit with their own style and values. Similarly, 'the teddy boy's theft and transformation of the Edwardian style revived in the early 1950s by Savile Row for wealthy young men about town can be construed as an act of *bricolage*' (Hebdige 1979: 104). Black subcultures such as Rastafarians and rude boys had a particularly powerful influence on the *bricolage* practices